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Keishi Ayasato
Illustration by
Saki Ukai
Torture Princess
Fremd Torturchen

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"O Sinless Soul,
stricken down
in a manner
most foul."
✦✦✦✦ Birth of the Fremd Torturchen

✦✦✦✦ A waltz for two
"Now then, my fair lady...
"...let us dance."

“Say, Kaito...
“...would it not be better for a world such as this...”
✦✦✦✦ Somewhere beyond the World's End

✦✦✦✦ Elisabeth's Diary

Clear weather, unpleasantly chilly, no battles against demons (and I should certainly think not).

Every day, I find myself wondering what the point of writing this is, yet here I am once more picking up the pen.
After the end of days was averted, I filled up my last diary until it ran out of pages.
Well, Izabella and Jeanne did contribute on occasion.
Still, it makes me wonder how I managed to keep it up for so long without losing interest.
Though, I will note that when I looked over its contents after being freed from the Diablo pillar, it incited such rage within me that I hurled it out the window. Even now, I can still remember what that fool wrote, down to the very word.
Come now, "I want you to know something"?
"I love you"?
If he were here in front of me, I would tell him to quit grandstanding. And perhaps I would punch him for good measure.
But back then, I couldn't reach him, and the opportunity to do so is now lost.
I'm impressed Hina stuck by his side for so long without getting well and truly fed up with him.
If I were her, I'd have broken up with him ages ago. But I suppose that's what makes them a good couple.
Now Kaito and Hina slumber together. Softly. Never parting.
Not listening to my response to Kaito's diary entry, nor my answer to his final words.
'Tis aggravating, I'll have you know. I am now and shall forever be furious. However, I have no intention of getting rid of this diary.
After all, the day may come when you two read it.
Indeed, someday. For sure.

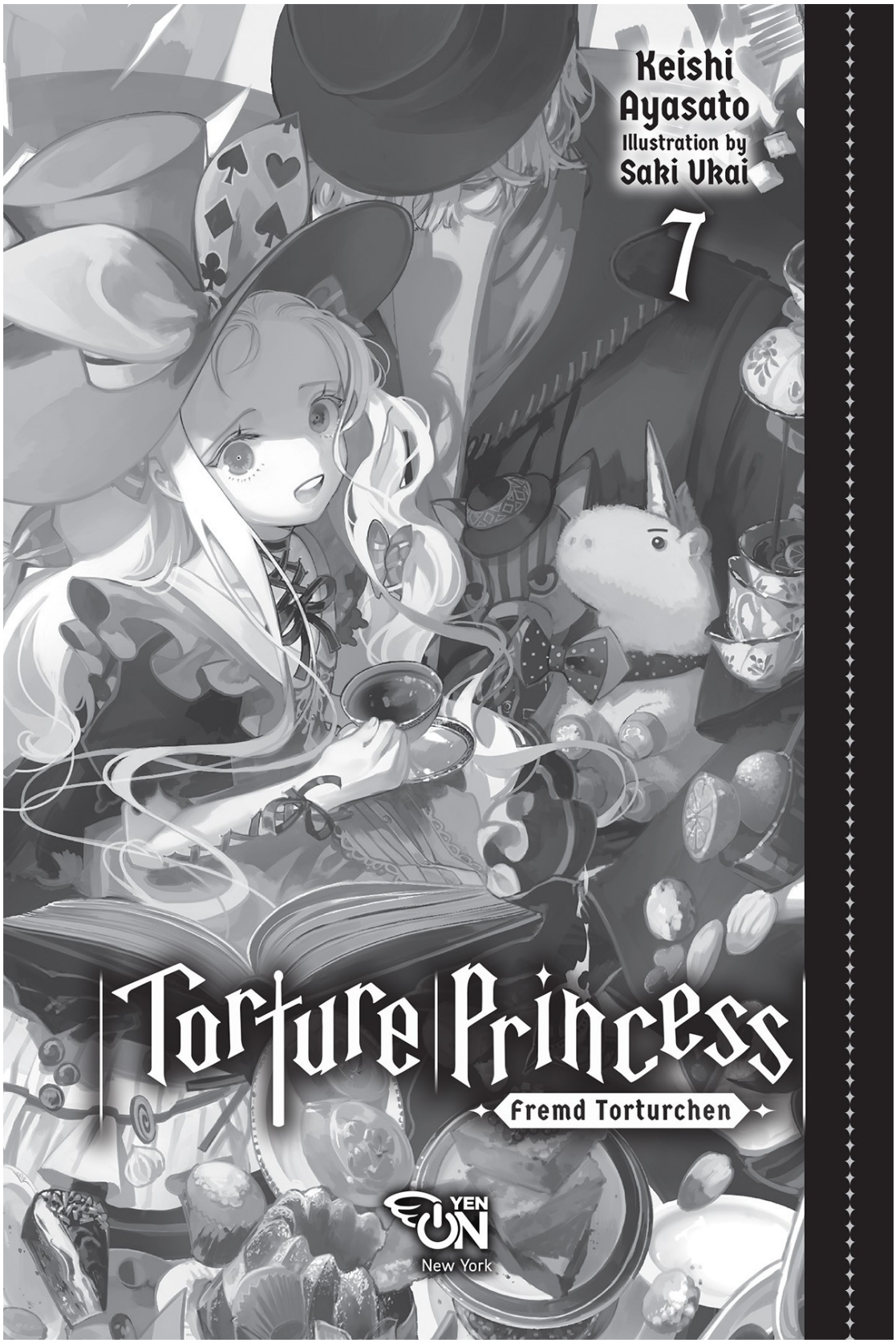
Today's menu ..... Lunch was bread, jerky, and assorted cheeses. Dinner was chicken stew.
My reaction ..... I must say, Hina's cooking really was far superior. (Also, the seasoning was still a bit lacking.)

Today's Kaito ..... Sleeping

Today's Kaito 2 .... I know this section is obsolete, yet I continue to include it.

I suppose that does it for today. I imagine tomorrow shall be much the same.

Hmm, how odd. I have these pictures from the first and second diaries, but weren't these supposed to be Kaito Sena's documents? Starting from the middle, though, aaaaall the entries are Elisabeth's. And I can tell.
She seems fine, but she's really lonely. See, I knew I had to help her meet them!
All right, I'll give it my best! After all, letting sad things stay sad is simply too sad.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Volume 7
Keishi Ayasato
Illustration by Saki Ukai
Translation by Nathaniel Hiroshi Thrasher
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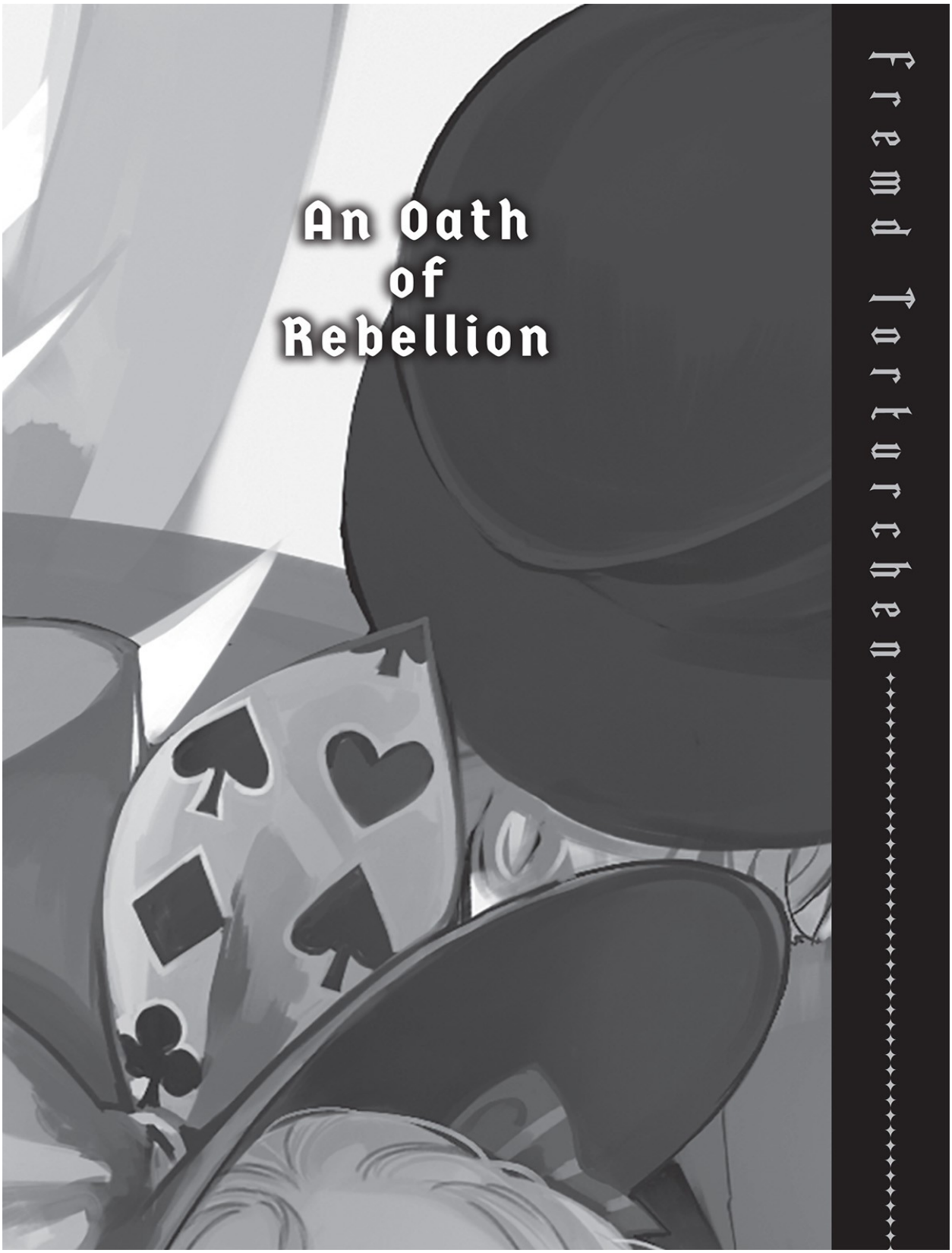


Fremd Torturchen

An Oath of Rebellion

Hear ye, ladies and gentlemen!

Let my words be a record of our subservience. Let them be heard as a lamentation of the humiliating lives you've forced us into. Let them be heard as a cry of rage at the cruelty of the fates you've subjected us to.

And let them be heard as a hymn of joy.

We have wept, and we have wept, and we have wept, and we have no tears left to shed. What choice do we have, then, but to rejoice in your tyranny? We have surpassed resignation, we have transcended despair, and at long last, we have found our answer. But reaching it cost more lives than you will ever know.

You people cannot even begin to imagine the cruelties we have suffered.

You see, most people are nothing more than ignorant, stupid animals. And why wouldn't they be?

After all, anyone unfortunate enough to be saddled with wisdom and reason would inevitably be forced to confront this world's contradictions and inconsistencies. And without ignorance to shield them, the discord would cause their hearts to shatter. So in order to protect themselves, the living reduce themselves to base animals.

When it comes to your own pain, you people are as sensitive as fledgling birds.

But when it comes to the pain of others, you're as dull and senseless as swine.

You only see what you want to see, only hear what you want to hear. And it's because you're all weak.

For most of you, your only crime is cowardice—but I don't give a damn.

You don't get my sympathy, we're never going to see eye to eye, and I find the thought of acknowledging you repulsive.

True, each tragedy was born from the weakness of individuals. But you people don't deserve my pity.

For it is in weakness that people have room to grow. Surely, there was something to be learned from all those horrors you witnessed. Yet you *persisted* in your ignorance. So, so many of you insisted on maintaining your inane foolishness.

Who allowed you to be so stupid? So cruel? Why should we have to forgive you?

Make no mistake—we have been called on to forgive you time and again.

A thought crossed my mind once—if the end of days truly had been upon us, maybe it would have all been fine. On the brink of annihilation, I could greet even your malice with a smile. All your atrocities could be forgiven,

written off as isolated incidents of fear-induced derangement. But God and Diablo failed to bring down the hammer—

—so I must do it in their stead.

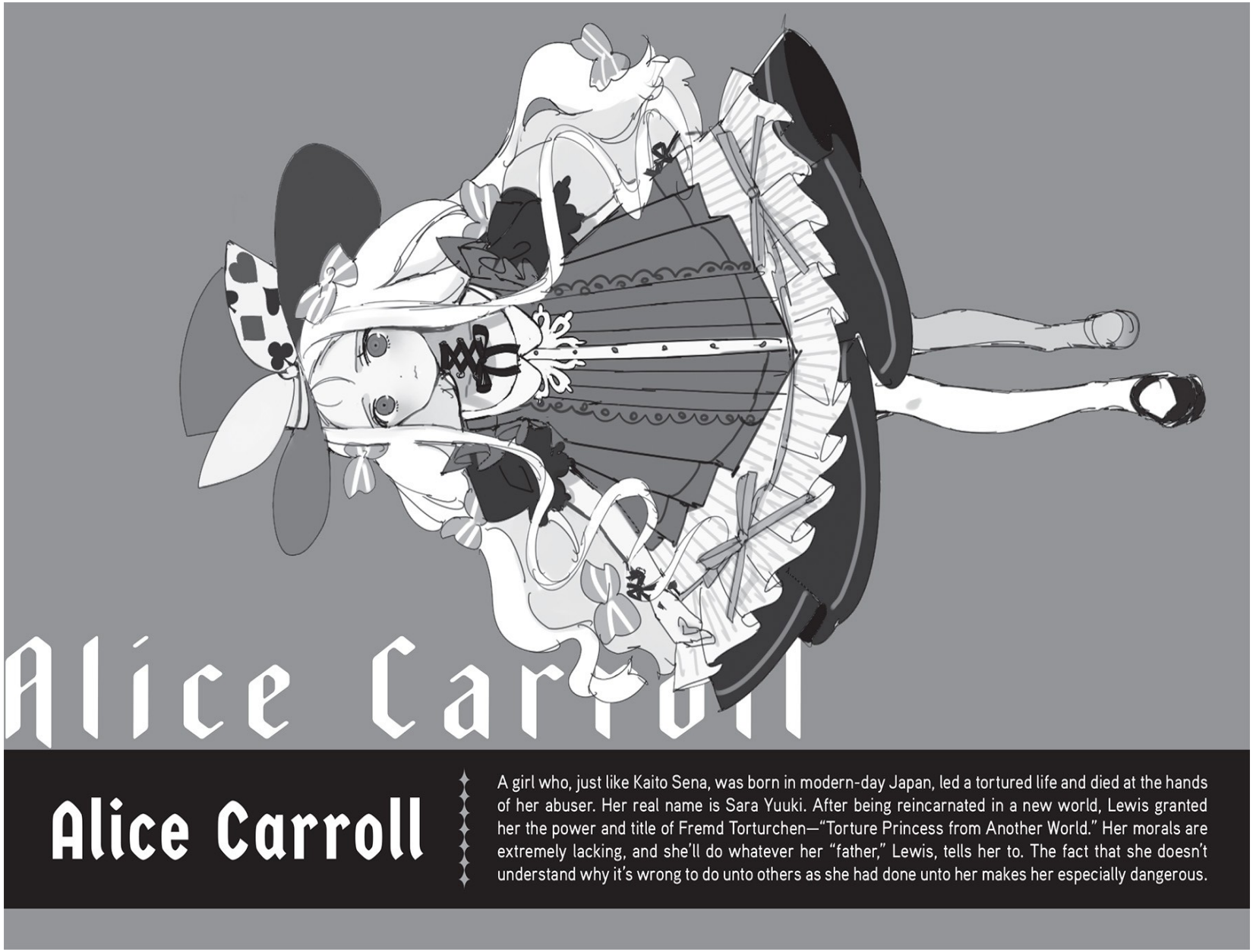
I'll take this world, I'll make it my own, and I'll kill every last fool who walks upon it. I don't need a reason. After all, justice died long ago. At this point, what use does anyone have for something so decent and proper? And at the end of the day, it doesn't matter if I choose to act or watch from the sidelines; it won't affect our ultimate fate. Salvation isn't coming, ladies and gentlemen. Not for you, and certainly not for me.

Ah…I do grieve like a child sometimes.

If only God were more merciful.

Were that the case…

…there might have been another way.



Alice Carroll

A girl who, just like Kaito Sena, was born in modern-day Japan, led a tortured life and died at the hands of her abuser. Her real name is Sara Yuuki. After being reincarnated in a new world, Lewis granted her the power and title of Fremd Torturchen—"Torture Princess from Another World." Her morals are extremely lacking, and she'll do whatever her "father," Lewis, tells her to. The fact that she doesn't understand why it's wrong to do unto others as she had done unto her makes her especially dangerous.

1
A New Stage

1
A New Stage

Three years ago, the world very nearly met a tragic end. However, that seemingly immutable fate was altered by a single person. And the one who accomplished that miraculous feat wasn't a grand hero of any sort.

He was a boy who had reincarnated from another world following a life of abuse and a meaningless death.

He got a chance at life, then had a number of experiences, some horrifying and some irreplaceable. Then after a long series of battles, he obtained a colossal amount of mana and used it to save someone precious to him.

And while he was at it, he saved the world.

By sacrificing himself.

After burdening himself with God and Diablo, the boy fell into a deep slumber at the World's End. Thanks to his deeds, the people of the world managed to avoid the apocalypse. The greatest good for the greatest number was, surely, the greatest outcome.

One could say they all lived happily ever after.

And that would be all well and good.

But whenever someone's story ends, there are some things that yet remain.

With its lease on life renewed, the world continued on. But the bells would eventually toll on a new curtain's rise.

For that is the way bells and curtains are.

The play's continuation was unveiled in the beastfolk lands.

And the new stage was the audience chamber of Vyade Ula Forstlast.

The chamber was a tranquil space with a pedestal atop a short flight of stairs, complete with a throne in the center of the area.

Curtains decorated with delicate embroidery hung gracefully on both sides. Their large-petaled floral patterns afforded the hall a gorgeous air, and their heavy, thick cloth gave the chamber the sort of solemnity one would associate with a majestic beast.

Normally, each curtain would have a number of skilled soldiers standing guard behind it. Now, though, their presence was nowhere to be felt.

All of them were dead.

The throne room had been transformed into a grisly crime scene, its mystical atmosphere broken by the smell of blood and the grim pall of death. And worst of all was what lay on the throne itself.

The two imperial beastfolk princesses were breathing their last.

The pure-white, wolf-headed second imperial princess sat atop the throne, unmoving. Her hand hung low. The red-haired, fox-headed first imperial princess—perhaps having tried to protect her sister—lay sprawled atop her. Their white and red fur, as well as their dress and military uniform, were soaked in fresh blood.

Neither was likely to open her eyes ever again.

A pair of humans stood before the sisters' bodies.

"The true value of information lies in its ability to set people's minds in motion. Moving, how the three races managed to come together for a common goal. But the information that was shared between them and subsequently leaked can be described as nothing but a gross error. The possibility of people appearing from other worlds and the details regarding demon flesh, in particular, should have been concealed."

The first one to speak was the man garbed in black standing by the throne.

He was tall, well-proportioned, and, aside from his melancholy ambience, relatively attractive. However, part of his face was hidden beneath a white crow mask. It really was peculiar, seeing a man wear only half of a mask. His outfit, which oddly resembled that of a doctor or a researcher, was black from top to bottom.

He continued his lecture in a level tone wholly unfitting for the situation at hand.

"I summoned a pair of weaker demons into a man and a woman, then destroyed both their egos. They had two children. Then I bred the children together. By repeating that process, it was possible to create a pure, powerful demon. Eventually, I created a demon powerful enough to meet my needs. Of course, the whole process was a little more involved than merely breeding mice. As you can see, it took me three whole years to reach this point."

"It's okay, Father. Please don't be sad. Really, we're just getting started!"

At the end of the man's speech, his tone took on a hint of chagrin. His partner, an adorable little girl, offered him words of encouragement. Then she turned toward Elisabeth.

Her hair was long, full, and white, and her eyes were red. She was somewhat lacking in pigmentation, but perhaps she had just been born that way.

"I heard your story, Elisabeth. It's a very sad story. That's what I think. I'm thinking about you, even if no one in the world is."

Her blue bondage dress was garnished so heavily with frills and ribbons that it was barely even recognizable as one. It was cute, but it was also so egregiously girly that some would consider it over-the-top.

Even for a world where magic existed, her outfit looked like it had come straight out of a fairy tale. And it wasn't just her clothing—her expression

looked unnatural, too. Her bloody surroundings made the broad smile on her face come across as warped and twisted.

The girl innocently extended her pale hand.

“I’ll help you! I’ll help you, Elisabeth! I’ll help you meet the people you care about!”

“…Who the hell are you?”

Elisabeth’s reply was concise. The girl gave her a blank stare. However, after pulling herself together, she grasped the hem of her skirt and gave an adorably awkward bow.

“That’s right; I have to introduce myself first. That’s what you did. So I should do the same. My name is Alice Carroll. I am the ideal girl of men and the sinful harlot who deserves to be stoned. However, that’s the name Father gave me and the words I thought up. My real name, the one I lost, is Sara Yuuki.”

“Sara Yuuki? Wait… That strange pronunciation…that self-introduction… No, you can’t be—”

“You’re the Torture Princess, so… Yes, it would be strange to be the same. Being the exact same would be odd. So as someone who was reincarnated, I suppose I should say it like this: I am…”

The girl let out an amused chuckle.

And with purity in her voice, the girl—the one unburdened by that world’s original sin—made her proclamation.

“…the Torture Princess from Another World. The Fremd Torturchen, if you will.”

Thus the curtain rose on a new stage.

The performers, who’d finally found peace, were given no say in the matter.

*

“The Fremd Torturchen? A new reincarnation?”

Elisabeth verbally reviewed the astonishing information. So someone had reincarnated other than Kaito Sena. And there was a Torture Princess other than herself—Elisabeth Le Fanu—and Jeanne de Rais.

But combining the two defied every shred of logic in the world.

Such a being should not exist.

Elisabeth was struck by a sensation much like vertigo. However, she quickly pulled herself together.

After forming a small vortex of darkness and flower petals, she thrust her hand in and withdrew a long sword. The inscription carved on its crimson blade flashed as she cried out its name.

“Executioner’s Sword of Frankenthal!”

In short, she was completely rejecting Alice’s greeting. However, the girl in question didn’t seem offended in the slightest. She merely broadened her

smile. Beside her, the man placed a finger on his jaw and stroked the line where mask met flesh.

"You are free to act as you will. But pray that God shall be your salvation. For the beginning, the middle, and the end all lie in the palm of His hand. Its appearance and inscription match the report to a T. It's odd, though—I've never seen it in person before, yet somehow, it feels like I have."

"Ah, you know of my sword. But a thousand reports will tell you nothing of the sting of its blade. Come, then, have your fill of it. 'Tis an honor rarely granted to fools such as yourself, but I'm prepared to make an exception."

Elisabeth spat out a naked threat, to which the man in black nodded with a strange, scholarly composure.

Then he retreated a step and gave Alice's back a little push. Her cheeks flushed scarlet as she stepped forward.

"Father? I can go? Really and truly?! Yippee, I'm so happy!"

"Pendulum!"

Elisabeth pointed at the ceiling, immediately launching her attack.

Darkness and flower petals swirled up high. Then a massive sickle-and-chain shot out from the black and crimson. Thanks to the momentum from its fall, the blade swung backward. Right before it hit the wall, though, the fiendish Pendulum stopped and swung back the other way.

In other words, straight for Alice.

It accelerated toward her at a far greater rate than gravity should have allowed. A number of chains shot at her back, too. Then Alice Carroll was impaled between the two—or rather, she should have been.

Yet no spray of blood filled the air. Everything was just still and quiet. Elisabeth frowned.

Out of the blue, Alice and the man had vanished from atop the stairs. A large black egg sat in their place. Its sleek shell seemed to have repelled all the attacks. Then a young voice echoed from within.

"*Humpty Dumpty*—once it breaks, 'all the king's horses and all the king's men can't put it back together again.' But it won't break unless it 'has a great fall.'"

"Hmph. A rhyme I've not heard, and a most peculiar rule. Influence from your original world, I take it?"

"Yeah, that's right. There's this story, see, and I used it as a base for all my Fremd Torturchen— H-hey, you startled me! What did you go and do that for?! That was too— Eek!"

Alice let out a little shriek—the egg had just risen into the air atop a stone Pillory.

Elisabeth had completely abandoned the device's intended purpose and was instead using it to give the egg its prescribed "great fall."

Alice looked decidedly alarmed. She and the man burst out of the shell. The chains attempted to follow them, but Alice repelled the attack with a

spray of flower petals. The man remained calm throughout, but Alice's eyes soon grew wide.

Elisabeth had prepared a mountain of pins at their landing site, too.

"Just let the skewers run you through and be done with it."

"Huh? What? Pins, too? Eeeeenough already!"

But the moment before Elisabeth's lethal trap came to fruition, Alice drew a circle. Hers wasn't made of darkness and flower petals; it was just a black disc, like a rabbit hole. She drew a checkered tablecloth like one might use for a tea party from within it, then draped it gently over the needles. The ground beneath returned to its original flat state.

Alice and the man landed with a *thump*. As she caught her breath, she wiped away beads of cold sweat.

"*Pant, pant*… Now, listen here, Elisabeth. You're waaaaaay bigger than me, so I think surprise attacks like that are quite unbecoming of a lady like you. Didn't your father ever scold you and tell you it was uncivilized? Wha—? Hey! I'm trying to talk to you!"

"Scold me? To the contrary. My foster father, for one, is a brute who's rather fond of surprise attacks himself… My, my… You blocked my strike with your bare hands? Your words may be dull, but your reactions are quite another story."

"Oh, are you mocking me? Or are you complimenting me?"

"Both, much as the latter pains me. Fool."

Elisabeth clicked her tongue as she attempted to put more strength behind her sword swing.

The moment Alice landed, Elisabeth had dashed up the stairs and tried to lop her head off. But Alice had caught the deadly blow with one hand. And after the Pendulum made its way back after bouncing off the egg, she blocked it in the same manner as well.

At the moment, Alice was perched on her tiptoes and grabbing a blade in each hand. Amusingly, her entire body was trembling. Less amusing, however, was the complete lack of openings in her defense.

Her technique defied all reason.

"Hmph."

Elisabeth let go of Executioner's Sword of Frankenthal, then kicked off the edge of its handle and somersaulted backward through the air. After landing halfway down the stairs, she leaped back once more and returned to her original position.

Alice continued smiling. She made no efforts to pursue. Elisabeth thought back to the girl's introduction.

Fremd Torturchen, eh.

Apparently, that had been more than just a sick joke.

That was what made it all so nightmarish.

*

Now then… What to do…?

Elisabeth shot a glance behind her. Lute and the rest of his men were frozen in shock.

They were doubtless still trying to process the combination of the grisly spectacle, the imperial princesses' deaths, and the man's speech. After making sure Alice wasn't readying a follow-up attack, Elisabeth snapped her fingers. Her sword, which Alice was still clutching in her hand, burst back into flower petals.

Suddenly, Alice stuffed them into her mouth. She licked her lips, spreading blood all over them.

It was like looking at a cat who'd just eaten a mouse.

"Mmm, it's sweet! It tastes like dessert. Yeah, like cookies and candy! Sugar is so expensive in this world, though… Say, what kind of dessert do you like best, Elisabeth?"

"What are you people aiming to achieve?"

Alice seemed to be babbling, so Elisabeth ignored her and directed her question at the man.

She'd noticed something out of place during their exchange of blows. Compared with the demon contractors she'd fought in the past, there was something decidedly unnatural about the man. It wasn't that he looked like a good person, per se.

It was that he looked downright *absurd*.

He seems oddly calm, yet that alone is nary the half of it. The look in his eyes is one I've not often seen.

The man's eyes were cold and hollow. It was like someone had drained all the emotion from them. He wasn't relishing his current situation, and none of the death and pain he'd caused seemed to delight or excite him in the slightest.

Given the grisly spectacle he'd created, that fact was peculiar in the extreme.

The man offered no answer. Elisabeth pressed on.

"You realized that 'by summoning from another world a soul that's accustomed to pain, placing it in an immortal body, making it form a contract with a demon, and giving it the heart of an individual who's ingested demon flesh and accumulated a massive amount of pain, it's possible to artificially create an entity capable of revolutionizing the world.' So, what, your aim is revolution, then?"

"What an odd question. In fact, I don't understand why you would ask something like that. Why would I go to such pains to create a revolutionary, if not to start a revolution?"

The man raised an eyebrow. Nearly landing on a bed of pins hadn't so much as fazed him, but the stupid question seemed to have rubbed him the wrong way.

Elisabeth nodded. There was a logic to that. Yet due to the peculiarity of the man's demeanor, she had to ask. As far as she could tell, he had nothing

in the way of passion or avarice. Whatever drove him, it almost certainly wasn't ambition or lust for power.

Frankly, 'tis ludicrous for a man such as him to speak of revolution.

Scorn filled her thoughts as she began laying out her endless list of questions.

The man's goal was to "revolutionize the world." However, it was unclear what specifically that entailed. Furthermore, he seemed utterly devoid of passion, making it unclear what had driven him to assassinate the imperial princesses. And also, it was a mystery why he hadn't long since fled the scene.

Hoping to get some light shed on those points, Elisabeth opened her mouth to speak.

The moment she did, though, a low voice sounded from behind her.

"…And that's why you cut those two down?"

"Lute, it gladdens me that you've finally joined us. But for now, calm yourself. The situation calls for discretion."

"You killed our noble princesses for the sake of some flimsy, fleeting whim?!"

Lute bellowed, his rage flaring up like an inferno. Elisabeth, still facing forward, extended an arm to the side to prevent him from charging. He let out a low growl after just barely stopping in his tracks.

The man in black cocked his head to the side a little. In what appeared to be a habit of his, he stroked his jawline.

"There seems to be a misunderstanding. Allow me to amend it. It wasn't just *'those two.'* Alice…how many was it again?"

"A hundred and eighty-seven, Father! Including the fox's twenty attendants!"

Alice replied in a lively tone. The man praised her by stroking her cheek.

A hundred and eighty-seven, including the fox's twenty attendants.

What do those figures mean?

Elisabeth frowned. The words had an ominous ring to them, but she couldn't figure out what they meant. Behind her, though, Lute and the rest of her men gasped. This time, it would appear they'd landed on the answer first.

"A hundred and eighty-seven…including twenty… But that's…"

"What is it, Lute? What are you all…? What's got you all so shaken?"

"A hundred and eighty-seven—not counting us, that's the number of staff who was working here at Lady Vyade Ula Forstlast's primary residence."

One of her subordinates, a dog-headed beastman who was quite proud of his short, black-and-white-spotted fur, filled her in. He was often lauded for his composed temperament, but now even he was speaking in a trembling voice. Elisabeth swiftly turned to the man in black.

He gave her a leisurely nod, then elaborated in an unsettlingly calm tone.

“Your men are impressively quick on the uptake. It’s a rare blessing, being able to think so clearly under such adverse circumstances. They’re absolutely right—the only ones on the premises still living… No, let me amend that. The only ones *we let live* were you, Peace Brigade Captain Elisabeth Le Fanu, and the men accompanying you.”

In other words, everyone but them…had been massacred.

It was only then that Elisabeth Le Fanu finally understood.

The situation they’d been placed in was far, far grimmer than she’d imagined.

*

They slew everyone in the residence, many of them skilled military veterans, without my even noticing it? A sick joke if ever there was one! And yet…

Elisabeth pressed down on her temple. The man certainly didn’t seem to be lying. Try as she might, she couldn’t sense anyone besides them in the building. And at any rate, he had little to gain from deceiving her and her men.

Given the situation, there was no logical reason to doubt the man’s grisly proclamation. Elisabeth dispassionately acknowledged that fact.

The moment she did, a series of faces flickered through her mind.

The cook who prepared her basket each morning. The lady-in-waiting who tidied her room so diligently. The soldier who came to her when he needed training advice. Now, Elisabeth hadn’t been particularly close to any of them. The Torture Princess was a peerless sinner—she never knew when the world would turn against her once more, and because of that, she avoided ever getting too close to anyone.

But even so, between Vyade the Wise Wolf’s influence and the debt they all felt toward Kaito Sena, the beastfolk were all exceedingly polite and friendly to her. They had worn smiles in every memory she had of them.

Every day, she’d been surrounded by friendly faces.

Yet now…most of them are dead.

They hadn’t even gotten a chance to say good-bye.

And now they would never speak again.

Elisabeth felt a faint pang in her chest. However, she quickly made sure to crush that frail sentimentality.

In the past, she herself had piled corpses as high as the eye could see. It would be the height of absurdity for her to be shaken by them now. And neither grief nor remorse was going to help them out of their current predicament.

’Twas a stroke of good fortune that Vyade dispatched her healers across the land as part of her charity initiative… ’Tis a useful group of people we avoided losing, Lute’s wife among them.

Elisabeth silently thought of the survivors.

All the while, the beastfolk in attendance trembled. They'd been quick to grasp the situation, but doing so had given them such a shock that it had frozen them in place all over again. However, their rage was sure to surpass their shock and boil over before long.

The man in black, on the other hand, casually went on, not showing the slightest hint of remorse.

"I see you gentlemen understand the situation correctly. However, I do ask that you amend your 'flimsy, fleeting whim' comment—although, I will concede that the trials you've overcome were most noteworthy."

"That's right! Like a hero from a story, and the native people who fight alongside him!"

"Alice, if you really want to become a proper lady, you're going to have to learn to control yourself. I'm talking right now, and it's rude to interrupt. Do you understand?"

Upon being scolded by the man in black, Alice puffed out her cheeks, then began spinning in circles instead. Her blue dress flared out around her like a blooming flower. The man, leaving her to her strange devices, went on.

"The first trial was when the fourteen demons, led by Vlad Le Fanu, rose up against you. The second was the advent of the Torture Princess. The third—ironically brought about by her actions leading to Vlad's successful capture—was having to subjugate the thirteen demons after they scattered and fled. And the fourth was avoiding the world's orchestrated demise. Your efforts in each of those grand battles were noble enough that even I find myself forced to acknowledge them. My actions today, disgraceful and violent though they may be, served a crucial purpose. You see, while you all were fighting for salvation in the light, a tragedy bleak enough to warrant revolution was playing out in the background."

"I see. 'Twas most illuminating. I now know that, much like Vlad, you're a tad too fond of the sound of your own voice. Just get to the point and say what you're trying to say, damn you!"

If Vlad were present to hear that, he would doubtless go on a long, pointless diatribe about how the comparison was unjust, thereby immediately proving it. However, Elisabeth swiftly banished the image of her foster father that had welled up in her mind on its own accord as she gave voice to her candid anger.

The man stroked the border between his mask and his jaw, then nodded with the same unshakable composure as always.

"I acknowledge that I'm not being very specific. Do understand, though, that that's somewhat intentional. In order to discuss particulars, we should first change locale. That's related to why I left you alive, Elisabeth Le Fanu. We see you as *someone important for us to talk to."*

"…'Someone important for you to talk to'?"

Elisabeth scowled. Those were hardly the words she'd expected to hear from the man who'd massacred her beastfolk comrades. Alice, not noticing Elisabeth's contemptuous gaze, hopped up and down like a white rabbit.

"That's right, that's right! We wanted to talk to you! Because I think we can understand each other, see? I told you, didn't I? I'll help you meet them! You can count on us, you know. 'Cause, 'cause Father and I are amazing! I promise, you'll be able to meet with the people you care about!"

"That's twice now, Alice. Control yourself already. I'm talking right now, and besides…"

The man scolded Alice once more. Elisabeth bolted toward them.

"Umm," Lute tried to interject, but the man went on matter-of-factly.

"…hearing you say that will do nothing but send Elisabeth into a rage."

Elisabeth drew Executioner's Sword of Frankenthal as she dashed forward.

Then she brought it down on the man's neck.

*

"—What do you aim to do?"

As her question rang out, so too did a high-pitched metallic noise. The darkness had exploded out once more to block Elisabeth's blade.

If this guard had been thrown up a second slower, the man's head would have gone flying through the air. It was a splendid display of defensive talent, to be sure. Yet the one who'd summoned the darkness, Alice, seemed completely dumbfounded. She must have acted on reflex alone.

"What do you aim to do to Kaito?"

Elisabeth continued pressing down with her sword. The darkness creaked. Thinking it an opening, the Peace Brigade's coyote-headed rookie cried, "Captain!" and rushed forward. Wanting to back her up, he took his first step up the stairs—then abruptly recoiled with his tail balled up. Elisabeth's murderous aura was simply that intense.

There was only one person the Torture Princess cared enough about to be worthy of being described as such.

Well, technically two. But at the moment, the two in question were inseparable.

Aye, like a single, tender being.

Elisabeth had no intention of allowing anyone who planned on bringing them harm to continue living. And when dealing with a would-be agitator, she had no intention of living up to the moniker of Torture Princess. The punishment for that particular crime would be swift, capital, and absolute.

It didn't matter if she fully understood the situation or not. Beyond the darkness, the man spoke freely.

"Your anger is legitimate—I fully endorse it. The way that information was laid out didn't take your feelings into account in the slightest. I do beg your pardon for that. Alice, you were in the wrong there. Apologize."

“Wh-whaaaat? B-but, Father, she just tried to kill you! Yet *I’m* the one who has to apologize? That can’t be right. Why, it’s wrong as wrong can be!”

“That was one thing, and this is another. *When you do something wrong, you have to apologize.* So apologize.”

The man’s voice left no room for argument. Alice clutched the hem of her skirt. Her lips trembled, but she did bob her head downward. The white ribbons on her blue hat, which resembled rabbit ears, flopped forward.

“I’m sorry, Elisabeth. It was all my fault. Please forgive me.”

“A fine jest, coming from you.”

Elisabeth spat out the words, but in truth, her homicidal inclinations were dampened a good deal. Insipid as it was, the other two were both serious. It may have looked like a comedy routine, but they were being quite earnest.

In particular, the man’s admonition that “when you do something wrong, you have to apologize” had come from the heart.

Ergo, he considers his massacre here and his murder of the imperial princesses to be in the right.

The man’s thought processes and morals were fundamentally broken. That was all too clear to her now. Meanwhile, the man in question was putting his earnestness on display and covering for his indelicate ward. His voice sounded out from lower down.

It would seem that he, too, was bowing.

“And there you have it. Could you find it in your heart to forgive her? I do hope we can see eye to eye here. All Alice said was that she wants to help you meet them. Please don’t misunderstand her. I promise you, it’s nothing like what you fear. All we want is to reunite you with them, and by all accounts, that’s something you seem to want quite a bit.”

“I’ll ask that you kindly refrain from assuming you know what I want. ’Tis aggravating.”

“A tragedy is a tragedy, Elisabeth Le Fanu—but it doesn’t have to end as one.”

…What?

The man’s appeal was sincere, but Elisabeth furrowed her brow. Something about it seemed off.

Emotion had begun creeping into his voice at some point. There was something unsettling about that sudden shred of humanity, but it was gentle and honest, too. And what's more, his heartfelt tone stirred something in Elisabeth's memory.

It reminded her of someone else, whether she wanted it to or not. And the moment she realized who, she froze.

Of all people, 'tis…!

Kaito Sena.

That was who the man's tone reminded her of. That sincerity, backed with compassion and empathy for the powerless, was just like his. It was a voice that only someone with deep, deep wounds could possess. But that didn't explain why he was using it now…

"You would speak to me in that tone of voice?"

"Of course."

The man made to continue but paused at the last moment. For the first time, he seemed to waver. The silence persisted.

"You will get mad, though," he eventually murmured. However, he made up his mind and spoke.

"After all, Elisabeth, you're weak, and you've had *everything taken from you*."

"Hedgehog."

The Torture Princess immediately snapped her fingers, and the hundreds of needles she launched at the man served as her reply.

An endless stream of metallic noises rang out. The darkness had repelled each and every one of Elisabeth's needles. However, *she'd expected as much*.

The attack's sole purpose had been to vent her rage. Unless she launched either a surprise attack or a repeated barrage of powerful blows, she suspected the darkness would hold. However, the latter was easier said than done. Letting the imperial princesses' bodies get caught up in her torture devices wasn't an option. The beastfolk held corpses in high regard, and with things as tense as they were, trampling on their culture would only make matters worse. Yet her rage refused to subside.

'Tis unacceptable… Utterly unacceptable!

Once all was said and done in the battle for salvation—

—what had Elisabeth Le Fanu been left with?

Posing that question to her was a taboo that must not be broken.

At the battle's end, her fleeting, peaceful days had been taken from her. She wouldn't admit it, but she had lost everyone she loved. But she herself had been rescued. The world had been saved. Everything had ended for the best.

And they all lived happily ever after.

The greatest good for the greatest number was, surely, the greatest outcome.

So what matter is it?

Elisabeth Le Fanu had been left with nothing. But to say she had had everything *taken* from her was a bridge too far. *He* had saved her. And because of that, she hadn't had everything taken from her. She'd had everything *given* to her. That was what she'd forced herself to believe. For what other choice did she have?

If she didn't, she'd be betraying his smile.

She'd be betraying that final expression Kaito Sena bore.

She replied to the man in a tone as cold as ice.

"You and I have naught to talk about—now, kindly perish."

The man was on the other side of the darkness. He shouldn't have been able to see what she was doing. Sensing an opportunity, Elisabeth pulled her sword close to her chest. Then she silently aimed its tip. After infusing it with her mana, she thrust it forward. The darkness shattered. However, she didn't feel the soft give of flesh on the other side.

A metallic sound rang out, but it wasn't that of sword on sword.

"Oh?"

"Please, Elisabeth, control yourself. You're a proper lady, not a bad girl, right?"

Shards of darkness tumbled through the air like mirror fragments, and the other side came into view.

Alice, who appeared to have moved instantly, was standing before the man in black.

And she was holding, of all things, *a teaspoon*.

*

"I see, I see… Inane, aye, but deft nonetheless."

Elisabeth gave a small nod. Alice had diverted her blade with the teaspoon's curve. No normal piece of silverware should have been able to survive that blow. Alice's white ribbons rustled as she looked up.

Her red eyes burned with a strange sort of irritation. She shouted loudly.

"If you keep being bad, I can't invite you to my tea party! What are we to do? Oh, I have an idea! We can pluck off your arms and legs and leave just your mouth to talk with. I'll even feed you cookies and tea myself. What do you say, Elisabeth? If you don't want that, where's your *I'm sorry*?"

"Ha, hearing an ill-mannered brat prattle on about ladies is fine humor indeed. I shall have you know, I'm no lady—and for all I care, you can take your cookies and tea and feed them to the pigs. Who would go to a party with the likes of you lot?"

"Why, you're not even sorry! You're not even sorry, Elisabeth! And after I apologized so nicely! That's not fair! You're supposed to be older than me! You're supposed to be older, but you're just being mean!"

Alice stamped her feet childishly. For whatever reason, the ribbons on her hat bristled up menacingly.

Elisabeth snorted once more. Tears welled up in Alice's eyes, and she swung her teaspoon about.

"You're a bad girl and a meanie! You know, Elisabeth, bad girls get shoved down in the tub, and beaten hundreds of times, and tied up with packing tape, and stuffed in garbage bags, and—and…all sorts of even worse things! And when that happens, no one will listen to you, no matter how many times you apologize!"

"Packing…tape? I've not heard of… Wait, no, don't tell me…?"

Elisabeth furrowed her brow. The fear in Alice's voice was real. Elisabeth opened her mouth, wanting to follow up on her train of thought, but before she could, Alice shouted once more.

"If you keep being like that, you're going to die along with everyone else in the world!"

"I'm sorry to interrupt you when you're having such a nice time with your prospective friend, Alice."

The man in black suddenly admonished her. Alice puffed up her cheeks and looked over at him. It looked like tears of dissatisfaction might spill forth from her eyes at any moment, but the man pacified her with a glance. Then he gestured at something with his chin.

"But it's time."

Alice followed his eyes, then let out a small gasp. Elisabeth and the beastfolk were at a loss for words, too. For the person who'd grabbed the man's wrist was someone none of them had expected.

"…Y-you're kidding, right?"

"Oh, not in the slightest… As you can see…this…is no joke."

Alice's murmur elicited a quavering response. Each time the woman spoke, blood trickled through the thin cloth covering her chest, further staining her once-white fur. Her life was quite literally draining away before their eyes.

Yet she smiled at Elisabeth and her men all the same.

"For I…do yet…live."

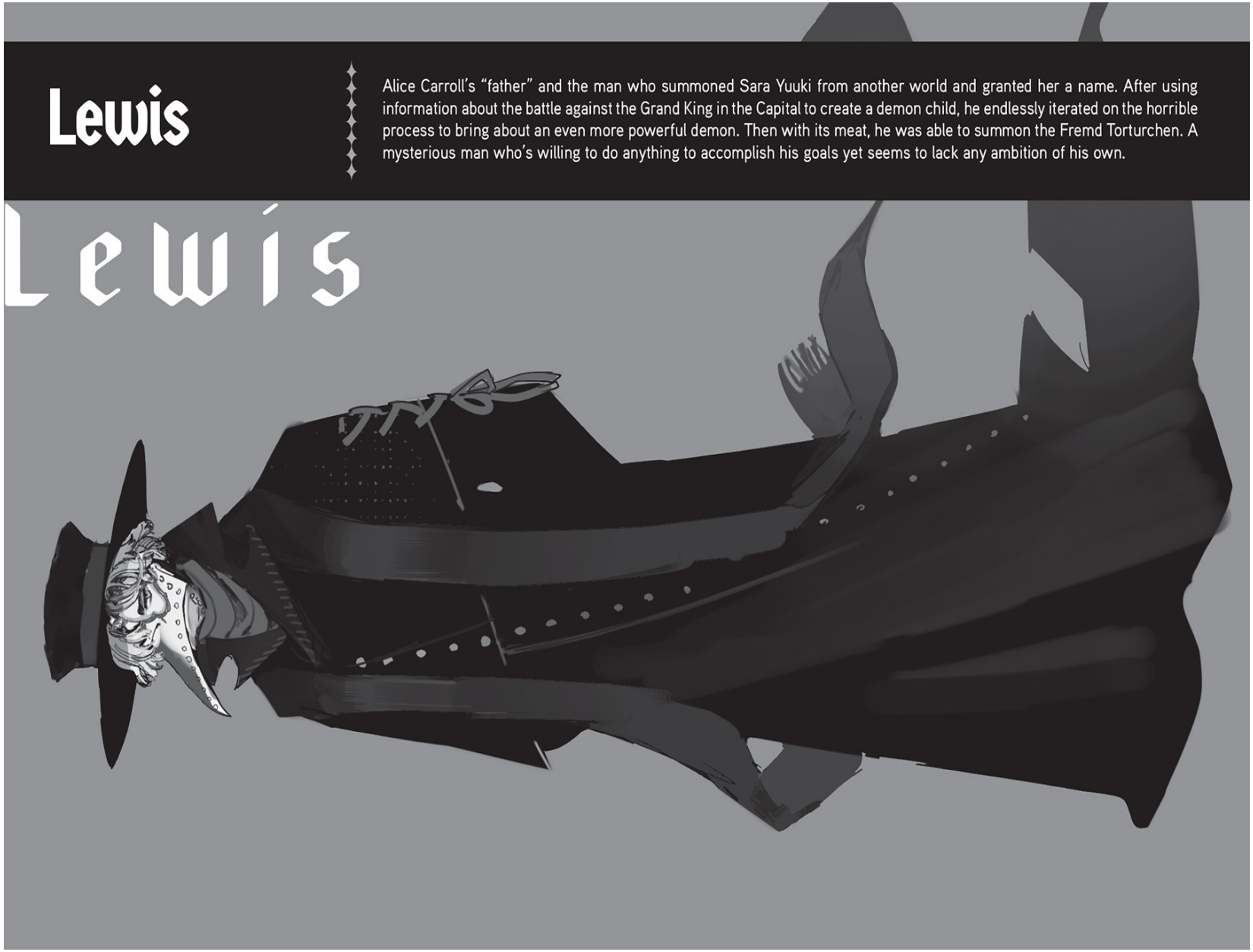
It was Vyade Ula Forstlast.

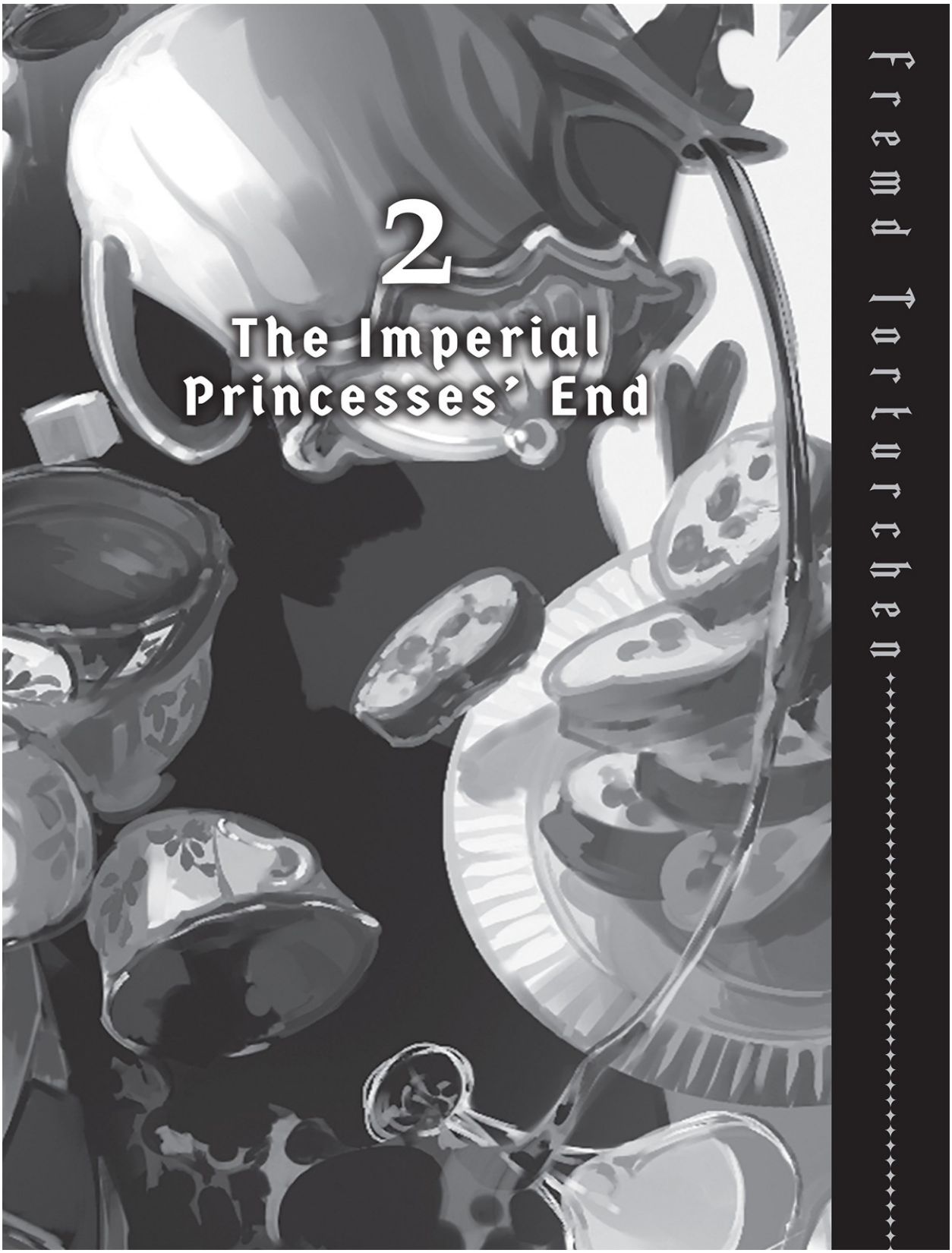
The second imperial princess whom they'd all written off as dead.

Lewis

Alice Carroll's "father" and the man who summoned Sara Yuuki from another world and granted her a name. After using information about the battle against the Grand King in the Capital to create a demon child, he endlessly iterated on the horrible process to bring about an even more powerful demon. Then with its meat, he was able to summon the Fremd Torturchen. A mysterious man who's willing to do anything to accomplish his goals yet seems to lack any ambition of his own.

Lewis





2
The Imperial Princesses' End

2
The Imperial Princesses' End

Down, down, down.

Alice fell down a very deep hole.

After being shoved down in the tub, beaten hundreds of times with a rolling pin, having my arms and legs tied up with packing tape, being stuffed in a garbage bag, and being locked in a car trunk for several hours, I suddenly found myself falling down a very deep hole.

No one would listen to me no matter how many times I apologized. No one would hear me no matter how loud I shouted. I was so sure I was being a good girl this time, so I thought and I thought and I thought, but I had no idea how I was going to apologize.

I didn't scream. I didn't get mad. I didn't cry. And I properly apologized.

But he got mad at me anyway, saying that my apology was annoying, that it was creepy that I wasn't crying, and that his arm hurt from hitting me so much.

But even though I was hot all over and my body hurt and ached, and even though rain and mud and bugs were getting in through the holes in the bag and rustling around and crawling in my mouth and ears, and even though I wanted to throw up and my tummy was empty and I was freezing cold and my teeth were chattering and chattering and chattering and my mind felt like it was going to snap—

—for some reason, I recalled a certain passage over and over again.

"Down, down, down.

"Alice fell down a very deep hole."

Um, when was it I read that, again? Was it back when Mama was still nice and pretty and smiled every day? Was it back when my original papa was still alive? Was it before the first time we moved? And after Alice fell down, down, down—

—what happened to her at the bottom of the hole?

My head feels so heavy. I can't remember anymore.

But it doesn't, hurt, anymore, so

may be, th is, was for, the bes t

ye, ahmay be, th,is, was f or the, best

best est est?

best?

*

"Lady Vyade Ula Forstlast, you're alive?!"

“—You murdered her?”

Lute cried out in surprise and joy, but Vyade, uncharacteristically, didn’t respond to him. She merely glared at the man in black, voicing her own question. She sat up straight, her body trembling in pain all the while.

When she did, her red-haired, fox-headed protector slid off her chest. Valisisa fell to the floor with a loud, hard *thump*. Fresh blood slowly spread out around the first imperial princess.

Elisabeth narrowed her gaze.

The first imperial princess had dropped like a rock.

Naught remains of Valisisa Ula Forstlast but a corpse, then.

After coolly making her assessment, Elisabeth shifted her gaze to the second imperial princess, Vyade Ula Forstlast. Just as she’d said, she did in fact yet live. *However…*, thought Elisabeth. *Those wounds are deep. By the looks of it, she was* stabbed with a spoon*.*

Elisabeth had drawn that conclusion from the ghastly state Vyade’s chest was in. A large swath of her thin dress, fur, and flesh had been completely scooped out. Her ribs, as well as the pulsating organs beneath them, were visible. The blow that had caused that wound must have been excruciating. As she studied the wound, Elisabeth began thinking of how she could save Vyade.

The beastfolk have little skill with magic. I could try healing her myself— No, such spells are hardly my forte. But there are no healers left in the residence, either. And even if escaping and bringing her to someone with enough talent to heal her were an option, given the burden the teleportation would take on her— No, ’twould be meaningless regardless. No healer alive could mend a wound that severe.

There was no point trying to lie to herself. The situation was beyond hope. Elisabeth had to plainly acknowledge the truth of the matter.

Vyade was going to die.

No sense in trying to save the doomed.

Her men seemed to have realized that, too. When they’d found out the second imperial princess was alive, they’d immediately rushed forward, but upon seeing her wound, they’d all frozen in their tracks.

Several of them crumpled to their knees. Hollow cries spilled into the air.

“Oh… Oh, Lady Vyade…”

Normally, it was the height of disrespect for a subordinate to omit the surname of a member of the imperial family. And sitting down in front of one’s master when that master was gravely injured was the height of absurdity to begin with. But that was just how horrifying Vyade’s wound was.

The man in black seemed to realize the state the second imperial princess was in. Perhaps as a show of mercy, he made no effort to shake free from her grasp. After tilting his head to the side, he finally spoke.

“There are a lot of people that could refer to. Who in particular is it you’re asking about?”

“My *sister*.”

A look of surprise crossed the man’s half-visible face when Vyade gave her answer. With his free left hand, he rubbed the line where his mask met his skin. Leaving his right hand in her grasp, he responded.

“If you had answered *the first imperial princess*, I was prepared to criticize you harshly for it, even though my deeds don’t leave me in much of a position to do so. I wouldn’t have looked fondly on your treating members of the imperial family differently from your subjects. Asking about your own family, though—that’s entirely reasonable. As a sister, you have every right to question me, and every right to despise me.”

The man’s voice was tinged with respect as he spoke to the dying Vyade. However, it was also free of shame.

“To answer your question, yes. I murdered your sister.”

“You killed Valisisa Ula Forstlast?”

“I did. I killed Valisisa Ula Forstlast.”

Vyade asked. The man answered. And Elisabeth was struck speechless.

Not at the answer.

At the change in Vyade Ula Forstlast.

The moment she heard the man’s response, Vyade contorted the corners of her mouth. A fierce smile spread across her face, one full of grief and hatred and bloodlust and rage. It was an expression hardly befitting the Wise Wolf—it was something you’d expect to see on a monster or a demon.

The second imperial princess began speaking like a woman possessed.

“Valisisa Ula Forstlast had the capacity of a dynast. Back before the end of days, she would have prioritized surviving even if it meant sacrificing me. But because we’ve entered an era of peace, she sacrificed her body to protect me. She determined that the fear and confusion over losing Vyade the Wise Wolf would threaten the stability our country has finally gained over these past three years. How truly gallant. Heh, although, it would seem that my wound is plenty fatal as well. Apparently, even my sister can make mistakes. Who would have thought?”

Much to everyone’s surprise, Vyade began laughing in amusement. With each chuckle, blood spurted violently from her mouth. But her fluid speech seemed hardly to be that of a dying woman.

It seemed downright bizarre.

Alice looked to the man, her eyes wholly frightened. The white ribbons on her hat began trembling as well.

“Father…isn’t it weird? Why is the dying dog talking so normally? She’s all covered in blood, and yet… I think it’s a little creepy.”

“Oh yes, this normally wouldn’t be possible. It may not seem like it, young miss, but I’m trying very hard right now.”

Alice’s face froze. She peeked timidly at Vyade.

Vyade gave her a gentle smile. *Ah*, thought Elisabeth, nodding, *so that's it*. Vyade, ignoring the fact that Alice had just called her a dog, winked charmingly.

"I needed to *buy time*, you see."

"Hmm? …Wha—?!"

Alice looked down, then let out a little yelp. At some point, light-silver ivy had begun coiling around her ankles. And the same had happened to the man in black. However, his expression remained unchanged.

Vyade calmly let go of the man's wrist.

"I wasn't able to stop your raid…so perhaps I'm in no position to talk. But if you wish to be on top, you need to constantly consider the possibility of having the carpet pulled out from under you."

She quietly opened her palm.

Sitting atop its pink pad sat a gorgeous, shining ring.

"Right before she passed, my sister made sure to entrust this to me."

While Valisisa was alive, it was the one ornament she had always kept on her person. That silver loop was where the ivy was coming from. A pink flower bud was sealed within the crystal at its center, like spring itself had been frozen in ice. And now that crystal had undergone a major change.

The bud within had burst into magnificent bloom.

The pink crystal-flower's gold center was glowing. As it did, tiny sparks burst off it as the compressed mana within whirled like a tempest in a teacup.

"—!"

Alice swung her teaspoon down and smashed it into the vines binding her ankles. However, doing so simply made a sound like she was striking dragon scales and caused her teaspoon to twist at an odd angle.

That was largely what Elisabeth had expected to have happened. Those vines clearly had an abnormal hardness and flexibility to them.

Alice bit her lip, visibly shaken.

Vyade opened her mouth to speak to her men, her gaze fixed on Alice all the while.

"Lute. My surviving soldiers. This will be your final order from Vyade Ula Forstlast. Take Madam Elisabeth and flee, now. And no matter what, don't stop running. I have no desire to get you caught up in what I'm about to do."

"Wh-what are you talking about, Lady Vyade Ula Forstlast?! We could never abandon our—"

"You would have me repeat my final order?! Run!"

Vyade's sharp reprimand cut through the air, her intonation reminiscent of Valisisa's. Lute and the others reflexively straightened their backs. Unlike her dynast sister, however, Vyade followed up in a gentler tone.

"You all are fine soldiers, but there is no meaning in protecting a dying woman. We are all children of our Three Kings of the Forest, and it is your duty to live long so you may continue serving the people."

Even if she died, there were some things that went on. There were some things that had to.

She urged them forth, her voice as tender as a sister's and as firm as a mother's.

"Now go and don't turn back."

All at once, the beastfolk soldiers cried out. They looked up at the ceiling and howled in unison.

It was as though they were paying their respects to a star in the sky. Alice covered her ears, and her hat's white ribbons folded themselves over in kind. The man offered no response. Elisabeth stood wordlessly.

The howls continued, then suddenly stopped. Then as their echoes yet reverberated, the beastfolk leaned forward and took off from the stairs and floor at a dash. The rookie was still on his back on the floor, but one of the Brigade's more veteran members grabbed him by the collar and pulled him along.

"Come now, run!"

"Pardon the impropriety, Madam Elisabeth!"

Lute scooped Elisabeth up and slung her over his shoulder.

As she obediently let him carry her, Elisabeth continued watching Vyade.

The second imperial princess faced their enemies alone and opened her mouth once more. Blood spilled from it as she spoke. But this time, her words were not a last will made to her comrades.

They were a bitter curse, spat at her foes.

"For the crimes committed against my subjects, I would have you die a thousand times over. But most unforgivable of all, you murdered my sister. Valisisa Ula Forstlast was a precious treasure chosen by the Three Kings of the Forest, as was I. We were royalty, chosen by the Three Kings to serve as special pawns. We were this country's greatest treasures, as well as servants to its people."

"…Hmm. While I'm still not fond of the special status you seem to assign royals, your recognition of your role as 'servants of the people' still merits praise… No, forgive me. I'm just talking to myself. Please go on."

"I don't recall asking for your permission. But for those who destroy such treasures, the only fitting punishment is death. For such an act is unforgivable. Till the end of days, you shall never be forgiven—and thus, you shall perish here and now."

Vyade's fur, stained crimson, bristled with malice. Her blood pressure must have risen, too, as blood began spilling from her chest even faster. The Wise Wolf's long-hidden fury filled the room with its terrifying presence.

As she stood, still dying, she curled her lips into a grim smile.

"None of us are leaving here alive."

"Father…"

Alice yanked on the hem of the man's coat in fear. However, he didn't stir.

For a moment, the room was still.

Then Vyade glanced to the side. Her and Elisabeth’s gazes met.

Vyade nodded, as though saying she was leaving the rest to her. Elisabeth nodded back. Perhaps that came as a relief to her, as Vyade’s expression softened a little. For just a second, it looked like she was about to cry.

Elisabeth could tell there were two emotions waging war inside her.

A deep rage—the desire to take her enemies down with her, even when faced with certain death.

And a childlike fear—the fear of dying, especially after having just watched her subjects and adoptive sister get struck down in front of her.

The two emotions were at stark odds. As long as they stayed inside her, they could coexist.

But the dying woman only had room on the outside to express one.

* * *

“Consider it an honor to die alongside me, villains!”

Without a shred of hesitation, Vyade chose the former, stifling her fear and raising her voice high. There was no falsehood in the proud, elegant figure she cast. Yet at the same time, it seemed unbearably tragic.

’Twould be a slight of the highest order to voice that thought, though.

Consequently, Elisabeth chose to remain silent. She just continued watching the second imperial princess.

Vyade didn’t cry. She glared majestically at her foes, not shedding a single tear. The man, seemingly in response, gave a slight nod. Then he moved with intention for the first time and shifted his fingers.

A small shuffling noise sounded out.

The man had removed his half mask, as one might take off a hat as a show of respect.

From Elisabeth’s position, all she could see was the half of his face that had been visible all along. However, when Vyade saw the rest, her eyes went wide.

Then something remarkable happened.

All the malice drained from Vyade’s face.

Seemingly having come to understand something, she let out a quiet murmur.

“You’re…”

The man appeared to smile.

There was no animosity in it.

Then Elisabeth and the others passed through the audience chamber’s entrance. Lute and his men hastily rushed into the hallway. And as though it had been waiting for that, the crystal’s glow reached its zenith.

A sound like that of glass shattering rang out. A flash of lightning filled the room, burning the curtains away. The ivy twisted and cracked like whips. The pink flower twirled. The air began turning silver.

Elisabeth’s retinas burned.

Then she stopped being able to see altogether.

She saw nothing—

—and no one—

—not even the face—

the imperial princess made in her final moments.

*

Vision slowly returned to her seared retinas.

However, the world still appeared the same—everything in front of her was completely white.

Curious, she reached out her hand. When she did, her fingertips quickly went flat. The whiteness was solid. At that point, she finally realized what had happened.

She was in front of the audience chamber's entrance, and every square inch of the chamber before her was packed with pale-silver ivy. That was why it had felt like her vision hadn't come back yet.

The plant within the crystal grew at an explosive rate, I take it.

As she made her conjecture, she reached out and touched the densely packed vines once more. They were cold, firm, and soft, like a corpse that was just coming out of rigor mortis. It reminded her of a graveyard.

And in a sense, it was one. After all, nobody within the audience chamber could have survived.

No one inside could have escaped being crushed.

"Ah, I see. 'Twas a self-destruct device, to be used in the event an imperial was captured by any who meant to do the nation harm… Ha, *that* was the item generations of imperials took such painstaking care to pass down?"

Elisabeth murmured in exasperation, but the voice that came out was tinged with anger at the absurdity of it all. She frowned. She'd had no intentions of getting emotional over the situation.

Suddenly, her frame of view swiveled.

"Hmm?"

"Pardon me."

Lute, who must have wanted to check for himself, had turned around. Elisabeth was still facing backward over his shoulder. Having no desire to be spun about any further, she hopped down.

Lute stared silently at the silver mass. Suddenly, though, he pounded his fist against the ivy wall.

"Lady Vyade Ula Forstlast…"

He was clearly reflecting on each syllable as it came out of his mouth. He closed his eyes and caught his breath. Then after practically tearing himself off the wall, he thumped his chest, assumed a salute, and knelt.

The rest of the beastfolk followed his lead. It was their way of showing their grief, as well as their respect for their late master.

Elisabeth, the lone member standing, waited for them to finish their prayer.

Eventually, the silence ended. Lute shook his head as he solemnly rose.

"That's all the time we can spare lamenting our cowardice and helplessness. Lady Valisisa Ula Forstlast and Lady Vyade Ula Forstlast, the first and second imperial princesses, have fallen. We need to make sure the Three Kings of the Forest and the rest of the imperial family are safe."

"Not just them. 'Tis important we check the status of the other races' dignitaries as well."

Elisabeth amended Lute's statement with a warning. Startled, he turned to look at her.

What makes you say that? his eyes were asking. Elisabeth's reply came dispassionately.

"Alice Carroll told us as much. 'If you keep being like that, *you're going to die along with everyone else in the world.*' The beastfolk weren't their sole target."

Alice hadn't said that with any sort of agenda in mind. She'd simply been mad. Yet even so, her childish outburst had been akin to a proclamation of war.

They wish to revolutionize the world.

It was still unclear what their exact goals were. But given that they'd summoned the Fremd Torturchen to facilitate their revolution, something told her that they weren't just planning on handing out pamphlets.

Whatever they were planning, it was going to have a substantial body count.

Vyade took those two down with her…but I doubt things will end so easily.

Her intuition as the Torture Princess told her that worse developments were yet to come.

Blood would flow. People would die.

And their screams would give birth to despair.

Just now, she'd gotten a whiff of the embers smoldering in the world's dark underbelly. She was on high alert, like an animal reacting to imperceptible signs of a coming calamity. Something was coming. Something comparable to the end of days.

She didn't know what it was, but there was one thing she was certain of.

It was the same as what Kaito Sena had known all those years ago.

"If things go on like this, we'll all die."

Skreeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!

Suddenly, a strange noise cut through the tense air. Everyone looked up to see what was going on.

The sound was coming from the window farthest down the hallway. It was sunny out, so the waterproof leather flap atop the window had been rolled up, and some sort of round object was smacking into its bare wooden lattice.

Bang, bang, bang. It pounded against the window in a pointless display of perseverance.

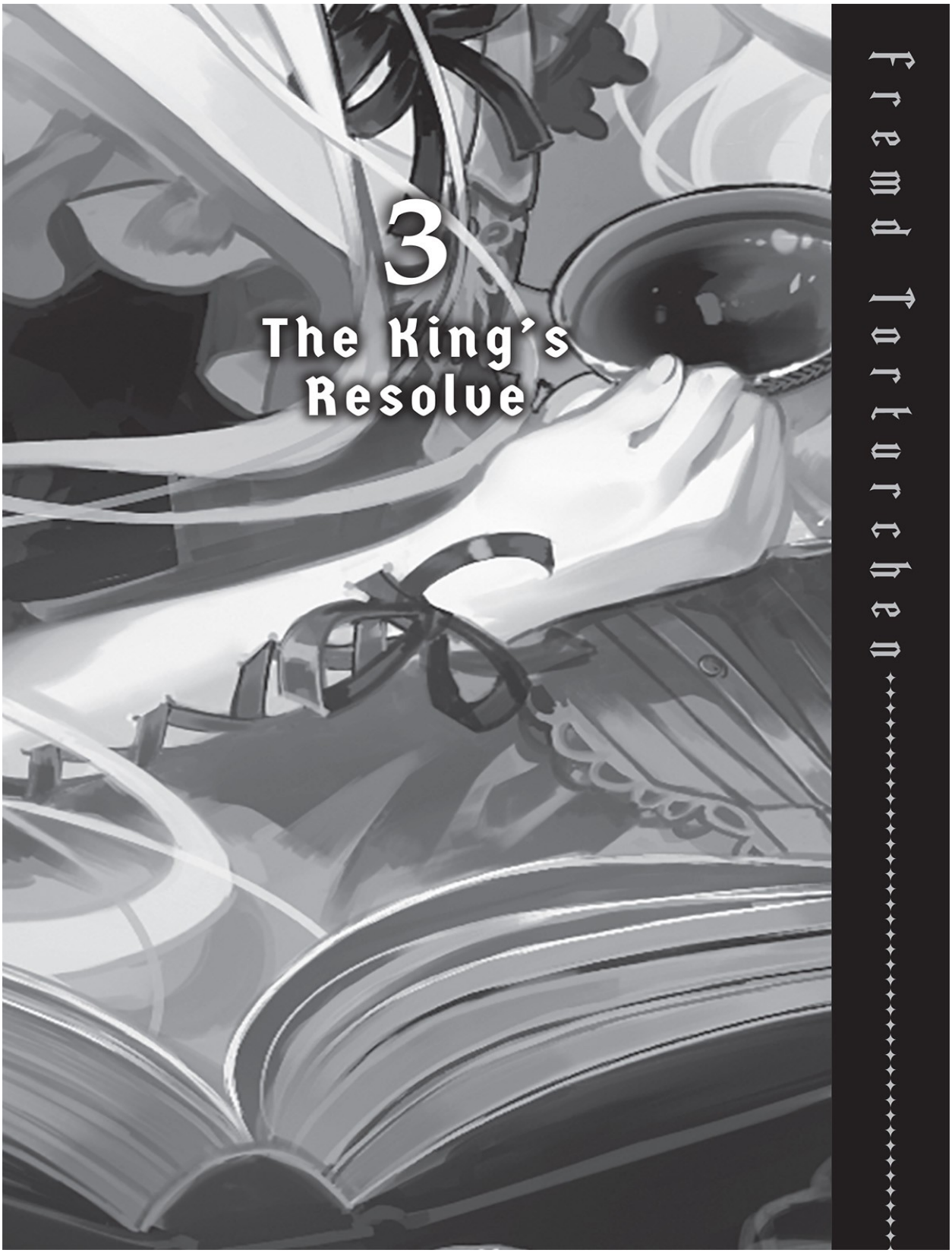
Elisabeth nodded. Lute, puzzled, spoke up.

"That's… Is that a…?"

"Aye. 'Tis."

Elisabeth was well-acquainted with those winged white orbs.

It was one of the Church's communication devices.



3
The King's Resolve

3
The King’s Resolve

It’s time for a story.

There’s no need to be alarmed. I promise, there’s nothing to be afraid of.

It’s just a little story about a simple equation.

Let’s say we have “someone who was cruelly oppressed” and “someone who gleefully oppressed them.”

The former will never forgive the latter, no matter what they say or do.

There’s no way for them to apologize. Not the slightest chance for atonement.

Given those parameters, there’s a pretty clear answer.

You multiply hate by resentment, then subtract those pesky ethics.

Then once the first party carries out their revenge on the second party, the story comes to an end.

And they all live happily ever after.

But here we add another parameter. One that throws the whole situation into chaos.

The new parameter is as follows.

Let’s say we have “people who did nothing” and “people who knew nothing.”

Let’s say we have a generous, openhearted world that allows the ignorance to persist, saying, *These things happen*.

Now, how do we solve that one?

It looks tricky, doesn’t it? After all, so many of the perpetrators are innocent. But there’s no need to think that hard. By changing the way you look at the problem, it becomes easy to find the solution.

All you have to do is cut through all the tangled-up strings.

In other words—

—that is what it means to *hate the world itself*.

*

“The Capital was attacked by an unidentified group. We request that Elisabeth return from her foreign dispatch at once.”

Runes scrolled rapidly across the white orb’s surface. The message was concise, but unsettling all the same.

Elisabeth turned the communication device in her fingers to double-check she’d gotten it all. There weren’t any specifics—the message must have been written in a hurry. She let out a deep sigh.

“They timed their attacks together, hmm? No surprise there.”

She'd more or less expected the possibility of a coordinated strike. Up until then, their foes had evaded notice from the three races' joint defenses. There was no way an army could have avoided detection so perfectly.

In all likelihood, the enemy's numbers were small. It made sense they were able to move so efficiently.

When your targets drop their guard, 'tis best to strike them all at once.

Was it that the past three years' peace had made them all complacent? Not quite.

After the calamity, the world was met with famine, poverty, ruin, and disease. Law and order eroded, and greater public knowledge of the menace God and Diablo posed gave rise to all sorts of new problems. The scattered remnants of the reconstruction sect began regrouping and gaining power, and demon worshippers began popping up all over the place. However, none of them rose to the level of a serious threat.

In part, it was because nobody paid them that much heed.

People had the power in them to create hells. But at the end of the day, man-made hells paled in comparison with the real thing. The hells demons made were beyond fathoming.

During the end of days, everyone experienced that fact firsthand. It took a lot to shock people now.

As a result, the three races devoted themselves wholly to their reconstruction efforts. And the peace they now enjoyed was the fruit of that labor.

No one had even considered that an enemy other than a demon might rise up.

In fact, not even Elisabeth had predicted the Fremd Torturchen's arrival.

"Hmm… Between the summons itself and the paucity of information, 'twould seem that time is of the essence. Now then."

Elisabeth ruminated as she rotated the orb. She had to make a choice.

As the Torture Princess, should she return to the humans? Or should she stay with the beastfolk?

Her execution had been delayed indefinitely, but she still belonged to the Church. By all rights, she should have been helping out with the restoration efforts in the Capital. However, that would have earned no small amount of backlash from the paladins.

As a result, she'd come to the beastfolk lands on Vyade's suggestion to work with the Peace Brigade.

She owed a debt to the two late imperial beastfolk princesses. On the other hand, she had a number of acquaintances in the Capital. But neither of those factors constituted a legitimate reason. If what they were going up against was on par with the end of days, then there was no room for personal feelings in her calculations.

We've naught but guesses and speculation as to the enemy's numbers or nature…but I wager that those two were integral to their plans. If there are

many more with power like theirs, our chances of victory are slim to none. They struck at Vyade's residence. In short…

In short, the World Tree likely hadn't been raided. The home of the Three Kings of the Forest was easy to defend and hard to attack. It didn't matter what kind of forces the enemy possessed—if their goal was total subjugation, then they'd want to avoid losing troops on high-risk endeavors. In other words, the Fremd Torturchen and the man in black had chosen to prioritize the attack on the sisters' residence.

But why? As Elisabeth racked her brain, Alice's voice echoed in her ears.

"We wanted to talk to you! Because I think we can understand each other, see?"

"I promise, you'll be able to meet with the people you care about!"

Bite your tongue, fool.

Elisabeth responded with a silent epithet as an image drifted to the forefront of her mind.

Two people, sleeping inside a translucent crystal. It was a beautiful sight—but nothing more.

She could speak to them, but they wouldn't respond. She could extend her hand to them, but her fingers would never reach.

Did she want to meet with them? There could be but one answer.

One single answer.

One that had never changed.

And one that never would.

But you lot made a fatal mistake.

Elisabeth clicked her tongue. If their plan was to try to entice her with prospects of a reunion, slaughtering the beastfolk was a poor way to lead into it. The boy in question would never accept a reunion forged atop a mountain of corpses. At worst, he might even return to his slumber on purpose. Back during the end of days, when he was forced to choose between the world and the person he cared about most, he chose instead to balance the scales by sacrificing himself. That was just the kind of person he was.

That was the kind of person her dim-witted servant was.

He truly is a peerless fool… But I suppose that hardly matters right now.

Elisabeth shook her head to get her thoughts back on track, then frowned in confusion.

The two assailants had referred to her as "someone important for them to talk to." But while it was true that a Torture Princess was a valuable piece to have on one's side, there was no particular reason it had to be Elisabeth. Given that the man in black had created a Torture Princess of his own, the reason for his fixation on her remained a mystery.

Pondering the matter likely won't get me anywhere.

Elisabeth moved on to another consideration. She decided to trust her earlier hypothesis and assume that the World Tree was safe.

For one, aside from Vyade and Valisisa—the Wise Wolf and the Dynast—none of the other members of the imperial family were particularly impressive. To put it bluntly, they didn't make for the juiciest targets.

On the other hand, while the Capital—and particularly the newly established royal residence—certainly wasn't easy to attack, its defenses were nothing compared with the World Tree's. Their greatest weapons, the saints, were spread across the land protecting refugees, and on top of that, most of them were basically living cannons. They were powerful, true, but they were weak against surprise attacks, not very smart, and only able to operate for short periods at a time. Their current jobs revolved primarily around the emotional support their presence provided to the faithful. The Capital's defense was left primarily to the paladins and Royal Knights, but they had their hands full putting down the reconstruction sect. And most of the mages who fought in Ragnarok, aside from the few who were making good on their contracts, had left on a journey to establish a new workshop. Compared with the beastfolk, the humans were probably in much more danger.

After all, the human race was no stranger to blind spots. They were the ones who'd unwittingly fostered those who'd tried to bring about the end of days.

"Very well, then. The choice is made."

The communication device slowly spun to a stop.

Elisabeth popped it into the air, then threw it off into the distance. It soared out through the lattice-free window. The sound of its wings regrowing and an angry voice expressing its objections filled the air.

Elisabeth ignored both, instead turning toward Lute.

"I've thought it through."

"I see."

"'Tis unlikely the beastfolk lands have suffered any greater attacks than this. As such, I entrust you with confirming the imperial family's status and informing them that we have lost the first and second imperial princesses, in addition to a great number of valuable lives. As for me, I'm departing for the human lands. Now, the Peace Brigade is predominantly composed of Ragnarok survivors from the second squad of Vyade's private army… Your skills are true, but your numbers are lacking. Take no unnecessary risks. Should an emergency arise, call for me. And receive help from the World Tree's guard squad where you can get it. Then once our grasp on the situation is firmer, we'll rendezvous. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am."

He was still probably shaken up about the imperial princesses' deaths, but the moment his captain informed him that she was splitting off, Lute nodded without hesitation. Elisabeth narrowed her eyes to check if he was sure. He responded to her gaze with a salute.

"You're our captain, Madam Elisabeth, entrusted to Lady Vyade Ula Forstlast by mankind. But you're also this world's proud sword. If a crisis on

par with the end of days is upon us, then it is your duty to defend humanity, too… Back then, if not for our three races' squabbling, there would likely have been far fewer victims. We should have been able to do something before Sir Kaito was forced to make the decision for us."

His final words were tinged with pain and regret. Elisabeth thought back.

At the World's End, right after Kaito descended into slumber, Lute had grieved the most of anyone. *"I promised myself I wouldn't forget,"* he'd repeated over and over.

No one had known what he'd meant by that, but it was clear that he never wanted to regret shirking his duty ever again. Choosing not to ask him about the specifics, Elisabeth nodded.

"If you've no objections, I'll be off. I leave the rest to you."

"Then I wish you luck. And may the blessings of the Three Kings of the Forest be with you."

The rest of the beastfolk followed Lute's example. They probably all had their doubts, but no one voiced them.

Elisabeth frowned. She still couldn't get used to dealing with her men's deep loyalty and simple honesty. She'd never been fit to lead in the first place, and to be frank, she shared their misgivings.

To overlook a tragedy's beginning is to be blind as to how it will unfold.

The end of days, the great calamity that had befallen the three races, had been the end result of a long series of smaller tragedies. And the silver vines filling up the audience chamber were undoubtedly there because of the seeds of evil that had been sown long hence.

They needed to pull them up by the roots before it came time for harvest and the flowers within bloomed.

Lest this time, we truly perish.

The situation was unclear in every respect, yet a part of Elisabeth knew that if they did not address the matter appropriately, there would be no coming back from the fallout. Once, a stupid, simple love had saved the world. If someone had come to destroy it, then they were undoubtedly driven by the opposite emotion. And between their earnest voices and their tearless eyes, one thing about the Fremd Torturchen and the man in black was clear.

The two of them possessed that quality.

For those who've sustained such bitter wounds—

Elisabeth cut herself off midthought. Spinning theories based on emotion could come later.

It was time for action. Elisabeth drew a jewel out from within an eddy of darkness and flower petals. It was a magical device she'd created by taking a gem already rich in mana, carving spells, and pouring blood into it. She tossed it into the air.

It spun as it fell, then let out a loud *kshhhh*.

The moment it did, there was a torrent of black and red, and a teleportation circle manifested at Elisabeth's feet. A cylindrical wall of blood rose up around her, filling her vision with crimson.

Eventually, the wall cracked. Elisabeth closed her eyes.

Then as the crimson shattered, she opened them.

She was standing in a wide passageway. Although it wouldn't be obvious to someone with only a shallow knowledge of magic, the passageway was actually constructed out of a combination of several rare minerals. The blood and the melted jewel spun in a circle at her feet.

Suddenly, she heard a chorus of loud voices. Normally it was silent in this area, but now there was quite a commotion. People were shouting in every direction and passing by to and fro. Paladins rushed past her. A female official tripped, dropping the documents she was holding all over the floor. Perhaps they'd already been informed that the Torture Princess was coming, or perhaps they had bigger fish to fry, but nobody paid her a second glance.

It was an unexpected reception, and an unusual spectacle altogether. Elisabeth crossed her arms.

"Hmm, 'tis rather lively indeed… For all their fluster, though, 'twould seem the worst has failed to pass. I suppose I should take that as a blessing, but I would still *prefer* it were not so *damned noisy* in here!"

She looked around in annoyance but soon realized her protests were in vain. For one, a large part of the clamor was due to how resonant the walls' material was. The place hadn't exactly been built with noise abatement in mind.

After all, the building Elisabeth had teleported to was underground.

She was standing in the human king's new residence, the ill-omened cradle that had once housed the First Demon.

The royal family's ancestral graveyard.

*

The king was living in a tomb. And the tomb the Church had used to hide the First Demon, no less.

It might have passed muster as a sick joke if it weren't in quite such poor taste.

However, there was a good reason for why the Church had chosen the graveyard.

As Kaito Sena had once pointed out, the Capital had suffered severe damage.

Repairing and replacing buildings was expensive. But while their labor and material shortages went without saying, dealing with all the corpses had been their biggest struggle of all.

After deeming it impossible to store the colossal number of unidentified bodies long-term, they'd cremated them. Despite that, an epidemic had still

started near the section of the capital that was submerged underwater, then spread from there. Thanks to the warning Kaito Sena and Hina had left them, their prompt sterilization and their efforts to maintain good hygiene had allowed them to nip the disease in the bud. But some people still took it as a sign that restoring the Capital would be too difficult and began petitioning to relocate it in its entirety.

However, there was one fatal flaw in that plan that made it impossible to carry out.

The frank truth was that it was a matter of cost.

Being broke was an extremely worldly problem to have, but it was a grave one nonetheless.

They turned to the aristocrats, the Church, and the mercantile guilds for help, but they were met with harsh criticism each time.

As was rightly pointed out, many people—faithful or not—had responded to the tremendous damage from the repeated demon attacks by endorsing the reconstruction sect's particular brand of "salvation."

As a result, the Capital found itself forced to remain put.

Their boon was the beastfolk's offer of temporary lodgings, technical assistance, and food in exchange for deploying some mages to their lands. From a national-security standpoint, though, having the king stay in that temporary housing wasn't an option. And having the royal family and key aristocrats living away from the Capital would give rise to a whole host of issues. But given their financial situation, it didn't look like they had much of a choice.

Then after countless meetings, someone proposed using the royal graveyard.

It was a last-ditch Hail Mary borne out of sheer desperation.

However, a cursory investigation revealed that this insane proposition might not be so insane after all.

While its barrier was broken and it certainly didn't hold a candle to the World Tree, the underground tomb was surprisingly easy to defend.

In fact, while the Faithful King—mankind's third king, and the one who'd given the Grave Keeper her authority—had concealed the documents asserting as such, they also learned that the graveyard had originally been designed to serve double duty as an emergency shelter for the royal family.

Then they discovered and unsealed the tomb's myriad escape routes, functional bedrooms, and spirit-powered cistern and water supply. While it was a problem that the material the building was constructed from prevented teleportation, they were able to catch the mages before they left and have them work together with the saints to analyze it. After a long series of heated arguments between the two groups, they successfully set up a number of spots where teleportation was possible.

At that point, the only problem left was what to do with the old kings' bodies.

However, they'd just forcibly cremated piles and piles and piles of commoners, and the shock of it all had shifted their ethics regarding corpses. As far as they were concerned, the dead were all the same, royalty be damned.

And thus, they cleaned out the mausoleums and moved all the bodies.

After sealing up the Room of Pain, which the First Demon had been kept in, they installed an altar in front of it and placed the coffins in a row atop it. They then closed off the graveyard's lowest floor, with an exception made for royalty coming down to pay their respects, and moved into the upper floors in earnest. No shortage of people reported seeing a displeased-looking ghost of the third king, but in Elisabeth's view, such reports were utterly beneath her interest.

At the moment, her sole concern was meeting up with the communication device's sender.

"Now then… Where in all this clamor might I find the one who called for the Torture Princess?"

"Madam Elisabeth!"

The moment she made to stride off, though, she heard a dignified voice call out to her from behind.

Elisabeth turned and glanced through the throng.

The first thing she saw was a beautiful head of silver hair. Shortly thereafter, though, it was followed by a number of peculiarities.

The paladin's pale cheeks had gears spinning in them, and various parts of her body had been supplemented with strange pieces of metal. Her tied-up silver hair fluttered as she walked over to Elisabeth.

"Thank goodness, you responded to our summons."

"You called, Izabella, so here I am."

Elisabeth replied dispassionately, and the woman gave her a smile. It was stiff due to the metal plates, but gentle nonetheless. Elisabeth responded by raising the corner of her mouth ever so slightly.

The woman's name was Izabella Vicker.

She was the leader of the paladins, and she'd fought alongside Kaito Sena during Ragnarok. Thanks to her fusion with Deus Ex Machina, her appearance hadn't changed much over the past three years.

However, the white-lily coat of arms on her armor was stained black with blood.

*

"I see… From the state of your armor, I take it the news of the Capital being attacked was true."

"Indeed. We wouldn't call for you as a mere prank. Still, you did well to respond to such a vague summons. Once more, you have my thanks."

"So why in the blazes was it so vague?"

“Several of the civil officials panicked, and the one in charge of communications sent the dispatch without waiting for my go-ahead. I’m sure you found the hasty missive alarming, and for that, I am sorry.”

Elisabeth nodded in understanding as Izabella apologized. It certainly seemed like enough of a situation had arisen to cause such a panic. However, she then planted her hands on her hips.

“So is time of the essence, or is it not? If it isn’t, I ask that you let me return to my squad. I may not be fit to serve as a captain, but I took the role, so I intend to fulfill my duties to the best of my ability.”

“Unfortunately, it very much is. This way.”

As Elisabeth followed Izabella through the underground graveyard, she glanced around the corridor.

The place looked completely different than it had three years ago, when she’d come to learn the truth of the world. The Capital residents had taken full advantage of the mausoleums’ original construction to turn them into living quarters and offices, and for better or for worse, none of the tomb’s original solemnity and sanctity remained.

For one, much of the building was decorated with plants they’d gotten as gifts from the beastfolk. The glowing moss, flowers, and wind-current-producing leaves both ventilated the graveyard and regulated its light and humidity. These amenities helped reduce the sense of claustrophobia immensely.

As Izabella and Elisabeth went through the passageway, they passed by people of all sorts and statuses. There were young maids strolling adorably, dukes and ladies walking annoyedly, and paladins marching with wide strides. Due to the way the tomb was laid out, it was impossible to fully segregate the rooms for people with different roles. They were making do with what they had. Thanks to that, people of all social classes were forced to mingle.

It was an odd sight to see in the Capital, and a fairly amusing one at that.

And I imagine the current commotion is only making things messier.

As that idle thought crossed her mind, Elisabeth continued descending the seemingly endless stairs.

Originally, even the paladins had been lied to and told the tomb only had five floors. Because of that, the sixth floor had no mausoleum, which meant they could use its full space as they pleased. At the moment, several rooms designed for specific purposes had been built inside it.

Izabella approached one of them, then knocked on its conspicuously plain door and spoke.

“It’s me. I’ve brought Madam Elisabeth.”

“Oh? I hadn’t expected you to get here so quickly, little lady. I figured you were fucking off in the sunshine like a retired watchdog, but I guess I was wrong.”

She was met with a strange tone. Elisabeth would have almost considered it nostalgic if not for how tired she'd grown of it.

Izabella opened the door, and Elisabeth followed her in. The walls inside were piled high with shelves full of documents, and the room's floor was bare, with no carpet or rug covering up the rare minerals it was made from. All in all, it was extremely cramped. It looked more like a storehouse than a proper room, and the pièce de résistance was the boorish stone desk plopped right in the center.

The person who'd spoken so rudely was standing before it.

In contrast to her tone, she was an adorable girl with doll-like features. Her hair was honey-blond, her eyes were like rosy jewels, and her skin was as white as porcelain. She was wearing a bondage dress, although it only qualified as "clothes" in the very loosest sense of the word. It was exactly who Elisabeth had been expecting. The girl's expression didn't change in the slightest as she welcomed Elisabeth.

"Greetings and salutations, little lady. They say, *I'll see you in Hell*, and whaddaya know, here we are."

Waiting for her was Jeanne de Rais, the golden Torture Princess.

*

Hmph.

For a reunion, it wasn't a particularly nostalgic one. Elisabeth and Jeanne had seen quite a lot of each other over the past three years. Now that Elisabeth was looking at her head-on, though, she was once more reminded of a certain fact.

Jeanne had grown a little.

Her shapely limbs were now even longer, and when she stood still, she could have passed for a piece of fine art in a museum. Compared with other girls her age, though, she was growing up rather slowly. As long as they didn't get as old as Godd Deos had, skilled mages could more or less stop their aging at will. It was unclear why, but Jeanne was choosing to have her body develop slowly.

Unlike her physical development, however, her sharp tongue hadn't been dulled in the slightest.

"What's wrong? You've been staring quite intently at me for some time. We last met not that long ago, remember? **Didja hit your head or somethin'?**"

"Aye, true, that we did. But who would've thought the situation would grow so incomprehensible in just those few short hours? Not I, certainly."

"Oh, I very much agree. Having the Capital come under attack right after I returned caught me rather off guard. **Like, fuck that, man! Feels like I'm livin' in a bad play. The script is shit! This writer's a hack!**"

This time, Jeanne gave a reasonably frank nod.

Earlier, when night had yet to fall completely, she'd been over in the beastfolk lands herself. Incidentally, she'd come because she'd been worried about her relationship with Izabella. Then after rambling on mostly one-sidedly, she'd returned to the Capital.

The tragedy with Vyade had occurred almost immediately thereafter. In other words, the attack on the Capital must have gone down at the exact same time. If Jeanne had stayed even a little bit longer, she'd have ended up facing off against the man in black.

The golden Torture Princess's honey-blond hair swished as she shrugged.

"The Capital's been peaceful these past three years. Our enemies must be quite proficient, not to have tipped their hands even once. **I figure shit got crazy on your end, too. What's the sitch?**"

"Your intuition is correct. Izabella. You ought to hear this, too. I have grave tidings… No, wait, before that."

Nothing was more important than giving her report about the imperial princesses' deaths. But even though she knew that, Elisabeth cut herself off anyway. She strode briskly over to the desk and glared at what was sitting atop it.

"What is *this*?"

The "*this*" in question resembled a baby. However, it also looked like just a plain old lump of meat, or perhaps a sculpture made out of clay. While it was clearly some sort of corpse, it was also difficult to imagine it ever having been alive.

Jeanne, her back to the horrifying, loathsome object, replied flatly.

"You should know better than anyone, shouldn't you, lady? Hell, don't tell me ya forgot already! You merc'd one of these fuckers yourself!"

It was true—Elisabeth did recognize it.

She'd seen one herself, back before the end of days when the Monarch, the Grand Monarch, and the King merged into a single mass of flesh and swallowed up the Capital. At the end of that battle, she and Kaito had had to face off against the exact same creature inside the fleshy monstrosity.

They'd faced off against a grotesque, ashen baby.

"A demon child, eh?"

The King and the Grand Monarch's contractors had been a man and a woman. When their bodies broke down and melded together, it had served as a sort of pseudointercourse and given birth to a horrible child—the child of two demons.

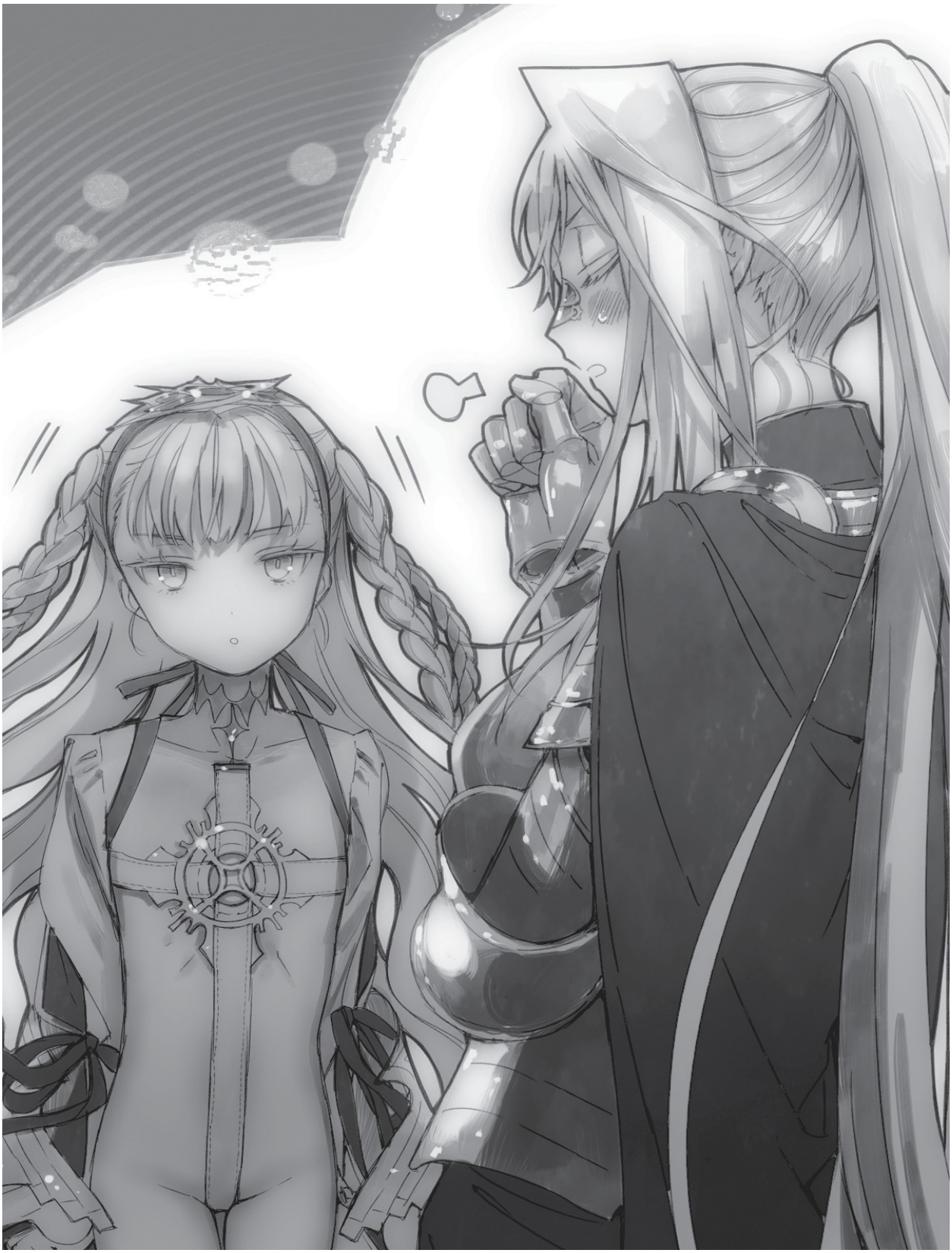
True, the two bear a striking resemblance.

Elisabeth glanced over at the horrid creature. The thing in front of her looked almost identical to the baby she'd fought. They both had the same broad, winglike shoulder blades. However, Elisabeth felt as though something was out of place.

“’Tis a good deal smaller than the one I fought, though. And the one from back then vanished corporeally upon death, as all demons do. What makes this one different?”

“You’re absolutely right, Elisabeth—most of the demon children that attacked us disintegrated on death. However, through a miraculous stroke of fortune, we were able to capture this one in a comatose state and preserve it.

“A few days ago, we raided a demon-worshipper temple and apprehended a mage who’d been researching how to preserve underling corpses. We were able to preserve this baby using information and techniques from his documents. **Perversion’s the mother of invention, baby! It doesn’t take a genius to guess what the fucker was doin’ with all those underling corpses in his bedroom, I tell you what!**”



Jeanne made no effort to mince her words. Izabella's eyes went wide, visibly flustered.

As the skin visible beneath the metal plates on her face flushed scarlet, she let out an affected cough.

"A-ahem. Now, Jeanne, I understand that the circumstances of your upbringing make it difficult to change that tone of yours. I really do. But as I've asked you time and again, could you please try to keep the vulgarity to a minimum? A charming young lady like yourself shouldn't be saying such vile things."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll be quiet."

"Oh?"

Jeanne snapped her mouth shut—a most irregular occurrence, given her usual arrogance and brashness.

Elisabeth rubbed her eyes at how unexpected the exchange she'd just witnessed had been. As she did, Jeanne straightened her back, as silent as a model pupil. Elisabeth couldn't help but ask:

"So how long has, um…*this* relationship dynamic between the two of you been a thing?"

"You're being boorish, little lady. We're in the middle of a crisis right now, so we should do our best to avoid frivolous conversational detours. Now, the problem is that we were attacked by several of these things. **I mean, they were poppin' up like the damn flies from when we couldn't get rid of all them corpses!**"

"I'm sorry, Jeanne, but could you please try to avoid making light of the situation as well?"

"I'll be quiet."

Jeanne snapped her mouth shut. *Is* that *how you intend to dodge the question?!* Elisabeth thought indignantly. However, Jeanne's evasive words had a degree of truth to them. She was right—now wasn't the time for that.

Elisabeth focused and turned to Izabella.

"I wager the babies didn't act alone. Did they have a handler?"

"They did; they were led by a single mage… No, we don't even know that for sure. We can't make any assumptions. However, they did have some sort of leader."

"You don't know? That is to say, you failed to capture the handler? Surely you recovered a body, at least? With you and Jeanne together, I find it hard to imagine they escaped."

"You're right, they didn't escape…but there was also no body."

"What?"

Elisabeth narrowed her gaze in confusion.

Izabella frowned as she recalled the event. Her next words came out hesitantly.

"Ever since the end of days, people have been absolutely terrified of demons. So when the attack happened, everyone flew into a panic. Things

almost turned ugly, but Jeanne and I managed to turn the tide. But the moment the handler saw that things weren't going their way, they took their own life. And to make matters worse, the demon babies ate their corpse. There wasn't so much as a shard of bone left afterward."

"Everything that might have helped identify them got completely devoured. It was all very purposeful on their part, but still, I'm surprised. **Purposeful or not, you gotta be fucking crazy to pull a stunt like that!**"

"Was there anything distinctive about their appearance? Do you even know what race they were?"

"They were wearing a jester mask and a dark outfit. We don't even know what they looked like."

"…A mask and a dark outfit?"

Elisabeth went quiet and thought.

There was no way that could be a coincidence. The Capital's attacker must have been from the same group as the man in black with the half-crow mask. And the fact that the man in black was probably the only person in the world who'd noticed the significance of demon crossbreeding only served as further proof of that.

"I summoned a pair of weaker demons into a man and a woman, then destroyed both their egos. They had two children. Then I bred the children together. By repeating that process, it was possible to create a pure, powerful demon. Eventually, I created a demon powerful enough to meet my needs."

She thought back over what he'd said. Instead of "demon children," perhaps it would be more apt to call the Capital's attackers "demon grandchildren," the failed by-products of the man's iterative quest for sufficient power. That explained why their bodies were so small and weak.

Satisfied, Elisabeth spoke again.

"I've a decent grasp on the situation now. I believe I have information that may shed light on the attack."

"Are you serious?"

"Indeed. But first, I have grave tidings."

Suddenly, the three of them heard a muffled voice through the door.

"The first and second imperial beastfolk princesses, Valisisa Ula Forstlast and Vyade Ula Forstlast, were murdered… Does that about sum it up?"

Elisabeth turned around to see who it was.

As the door slowly swung open, the voice went on.

"The World Tree just sent word of the sad news. It really is a tragic loss."

A young man with a freckled face came in. He was dressed all in finery, from his extravagant standing collar down to his silk loafers, and he carried himself suitably. However, his simple facial features were more the sort one would expect to see on a clerk in some quiet village's bookstore.

Elisabeth frowned. For some reason, she felt like she recognized him, but he must not have left much of an impression.

“Hmm, I can’t seem to recall who you are… Name thyself.”

“Your Majesty, you needn’t have forced yourself to come all the way down here!”

“Your Majesty?”

Elisabeth let out a shocked cry. Izabella knelt. Jeanne initially offered no reaction, but after Izabella shot a glare at her, she hurriedly dropped to one knee as well. The young man raised a hand, gesturing for them to stop.

“All is well. At ease… That goes for you, too, Izabella Vicker. It’s been some time since we’ve met in person, but I heard of your deeds earlier. Fine work, as always.”

“You honor me, sir. But…if I may be so bold, what brings you down here?”

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t the child who spent the end of days cowering in the World Tree and refused to come out until after things were all settled. Found yourself a backbone yet?”

Elisabeth crossed her arms. The skin beneath Izabella’s metal plates went pale at the spiteful remark.

During the end of days, Elisabeth had served as Diablo’s pillar. She was in no position to judge anyone, nor did she really intend to. But the king was the one individual she couldn’t help but lambaste.

He had made the choice to leave everything to the Mad King, Kaito Sena, and flee to the World Tree. If things had gone a little worse, his actions would have led directly to mankind’s annihilation. Then after leaving the safety of his people and country up to Kaito’s goodwill, he’d hidden away until it was all over.

Upon seeing that Elisabeth had no intention of retracting her statement, Izabella shouted in indignation.

“Madam Elisabeth, show some respect!”

“No, no. She has the decency to say it to my face, which is as much as I can ask for. I know full well what my subjects—even my retainers—call me behind closed doors. ‘The Craven King.’ ‘The Royal Family’s Stain.’ ‘The Yellow-Bellied Frog.’ That’s me. Maclaeus Filliana, in the flesh. The man who fled his country and the worst king in our nation’s history.”

The young man spoke firmly, but he wasn’t being combative. He was simply acknowledging his ignoble past—which was surprising, given how truly pathetic it had been. Elisabeth raised an eyebrow.

Seeing her reaction, the young king couldn’t help but grin.

“There’s really no need to be so suspicious. It took me a while, but I finally learned how to face my flaws. People really can change, no matter how pathetic they once were. All they need is a trigger.”

“Oh?”

“For me, it was finding a hero I admired.”

A hero? Who could that possibly be?

Elisabeth scrunched up her face in thought. Surely, there was no one in the world powerful or benevolent enough to warrant the title.

If heroes existed, Kaito wouldn't have had to become the Mad King. Before she could ask Maclaeus to clarify, though, he stepped forward. After reaching out and touching the corpse of the demon grandchild, he gave a short speech about the sin it had committed and the people it had hurt, then finished with a prayer. Afterward, he turned back to Elisabeth.

"Let's talk, Elisabeth Le Fanu. That's what I came down here to do. The Capital, as well as my dear friends the beastfolk, have come under attack by a new threat. Now then…"

Maclaeus paused to take a deep breath before finishing his question.

His tone was that of a man thinking of a hero he'd caught a glimpse of long, long ago.

"…what would Sir Kaito Sena do, if faced with this crisis?"

*

It happened just a short three years ago, but it felt like it had been a century.

"After I returned to the Capital, I researched Sir Kaito Sena in some detail. I'll be honest with you—my goal was to find some sort of flaw in mankind's savior, the Mad King."

Maclaeus spoke as though giving a confession. He closed his dull-green eyes partway.

Even without his elaboration, Elisabeth could have guessed at his impure motives. After the end of days was averted, Maclaeus no doubt came to a harsh realization. False, twisted stories about a savior earned far more praise than the real thing ever could. And there was no glory to be had for a king who had deserted his people. Unofficial rumors about the Mad King spread like wildfire among the populace, to the point where they were still being echoed in fervent whispers to that very day. For that was simply how rumors were.

But to the young figurehead of a king, that harsh reality was too much to take. And so he began his investigation.

If he wanted to protect his own pride, he needed to be able to look down on Kaito Sena. But things didn't quite play out that way.

"The more I researched, the more I was struck by my own ignorance. Even as the reconstruction sect solidified their positions around me, I was blind to the Church's insanity until the end of days actually came. But it was the next thing I discovered that truly filled me with despair. The man who stood atop that round table, the man who determined the fate of the world, was no man at all. He was just a boy, younger than even me. When I learned about Kaito Sena's age, I finally ran out of excuses. He saved the world, while I ran away. And nothing I did could ever change that."

Upon learning who Kaito really was, Maclaeus had lost yet again.

He shook his head in resignation. Elisabeth remained silent.

It was only natural for an incompetent king to be scorned. The powerful had the ability to tyrannize others, but so, too, could they be mocked and, if they were unfortunate, even executed by those they ruled. With how far Maclaeus's position had sunk, the wise choice for him would probably have been either to shut himself away or to abandon his shame and take the offensive. But he wasn't finished talking yet.

"Two imperial princesses lost their lives to this disaster, and I suspect I may be in danger as well. In fact, I'm sure of it…but…I-I've spent my whole life running away. This time…"

Maclaeus's voice trembled with fear. He seemed almost to be talking to himself. He tightly squeezed his eyes shut. But then as though he'd shaken something off, he opened them back up.

"This time, I'm going to stay in the Capital and handle the disaster from here. As the Craven King, the only reason I avoided impeachment was because the three races were all too busy with the restoration efforts to waste time on me. But if I screw up this time, they'll oust me from the throne for sure."

"So the useless incompetent is obsessed with his own status? How utterly pathetic."

"You think I give a damn about my status?! If I could get away with it, I'd love nothing more than to abdicate the throne and retire in peace…"

This time, Maclaeus reacted to Elisabeth's ridicule with a shout. The moment the words left his mouth, though, his face went stiff. His expression frozen, he turned to Izabella. However, she merely shook her head, pretending she'd heard nothing.

Elisabeth shot him a glance. *Why fight so hard to keep it, then?* Maclaeus gave his answer.

"After the Church lost its authority, my advisers began leaving in droves without even giving notice. At this point, the Church's support means nothing. But without a strong organization backing someone, the issue of who'll take the throne next will cause no end of conflict. There are several people I can imagine ignoring my designated successor and trying to name themselves king instead, and it's a delightful bunch of racial purists, closet reconstruction-sect supporters, and warmongers who think we should prioritize strengthening our army over rebuilding our nation. And even if they weren't like this, mankind doesn't have the strength to survive a succession dispute anyway."

Maclaeus clamped his hand down on his chest. It seemed the pressure of it all filled him with nausea.

After steadying his breathing, he went on.

"However, there are some roles only a buffoon can play. I may be little more than a crowned jester sitting on the throne, but for now, that's enough. My job is to serve as a 'heavy butt.' And I am prepared to fight to fulfill that role."

—As Sir Kaito Sena did to fulfill his.

Death is oblivion. But it isn't the end.

Suddenly, Elisabeth was reminded of something. Even if someone died, as long as the world was still there, a part of them lived on. People's lives were short, but their accomplishments outlived them.

Now, Kaito Sena wasn't technically dead. Given his current state, however, it was hard to say he was alive, either. So even though his life hadn't ended, he was, in a sense, "dead." Yet still, traces of his life remained etched into the world. And it would seem the painful way he'd lived his life had influenced a most unexpected individual. Maclaeus's reverence toward Kaito was the real deal.

A painful tinge of nostalgia struck Elisabeth as she ruminated on something he'd once said.

"For your sake, I could do or become anything."

His confession had been incorrigible, foolish, one-sided, and horribly arrogant—but it had been beautiful, too.

There came times when people admired beings who defied morals and revered individuals who weren't heroes. It was baffling. But those childish emotions had the power to bring about change.

For example, they could even save the world.

What now, Kaito? 'Twould seem you count a king among your admirers.

Elisabeth, still silent, posed a question to the "dead." If Kaito were present, he'd probably have given her a bewildered look and replied, *…But why?* She grinned faintly upon imagining his reaction but quickly wiped the expression off her face.

Then Elisabeth Le Fanu calmly opened her mouth.

"Your resolve means little to me. All I care for are results. But know this —"

The king's determination might well lead to deeds that could mend his tarnished reputation. However, there was also the danger that it would destroy him from within. The Torture Princess had no intention of weighing in on that matter, but when she went on, her voice was tinged with annoyance.

"—Kaito Sena was my dim-witted servant. He was a servant—not a king. If you wish to admire that self-proclaimed Mad King of a dunce, then such is your prerogative. But you would do well to quit puzzling over what he'd think or how he'd act. You are the king. If you're finally aware of that fact, then act the part and make decisions for yourself. If you've cast off your right to flee and decided to take up the crown, then live as the arrogant, honest slave you are and rule. For that is what it means to be king."

After delivering her statement out in a single breath, Elisabeth closed her eyes and thought of Vyade.

Vyade had acted as an imperial princess to the bitter end, stifling her fear of death so as to maintain her pride. It was unclear if that decision had truly been a blessing for her. From the perspective of an observer, the act

of killing off part of one's heart seemed both foolish and tragic. But so, too, did it reveal a tenacity worthy of praise.

Folly seen through becomes conviction. 'Tis impossible to fault her decision.

Once you made that choice, you had to rise up. Otherwise, you would merely crumble. But to be anything other than regal would be unforgivable.

Elisabeth lowered her voice.

"Make no mistake; you *are* the king. Not a jester. And nothing anyone says can change that fact."

"I…"

"But never rely on admiration for another. The masses will string people up, and even God can kill. Let pride be your sole nourishment. *I have the power to carry out my will.* Grind that thought into your brain. And no matter what the world throws at you, never lose sight of that which is inside you—elsewise, you shall remain the half-wit swine you are for the rest of your days."

Silence descended on them. Elisabeth clicked her tongue, half-annoyed at herself for going into such detail. Izabella gesticulated frantically at the string of abusive remarks. Maclaeus, on the other hand, merely blinked as he curled the corners of his mouth upward.

"Thank you for being so frank—it would seem I still have a lot to reflect on."

"Ha. The fact that you failed to immediately cast me in a dungeon for my remarks is proof enough of that, fool."

"That's true. When it comes to lèse-majesté, you certainly don't hold back."

Maclaeus nodded in agreement, causing Izabella's gesticulations to increase in intensity. In contrast to his words, though, he continued smiling.

Elisabeth scratched her cheek as a mixed expression crossed her face. With a shake of her head, she snapped her fingers, causing a pair of a cabriole-legged chairs to manifest out of darkness and flower petals. She picked one and plopped herself down in it.

Then she crossed her shapely legs up high.

"Never mind that, though! I've news, so listen well."

Maclaeus nodded and sat down in the other chair. Jeanne summoned a pair of simple chairs of her own, and she and Izabella took a seat as well. They sat at quiet attention. Elisabeth nodded.

"There's several key facts, most of which shall no doubt sound like crude jokes."

Then she began telling them.

About Alice Carroll, the Fremd Torturchen, and about the man in the crow mask.

*

“—Then I received word via the communication device and came to the human lands.”

Elisabeth finished recounting her short, dramatic tale.

It really had been a peculiar turn of events. Taken in aggregate, there could be no doubt it was a tragedy, but the individual aspects each seemed more like a comedy. And furthermore, they all felt surreal. It had been miserably vivid, yet at the same time, ludicrously ambiguous.

When he heard the specifics of the imperial princesses’ deaths, Maclaeus bit his lip. A sorrowful look appeared on Izabella’s face. Jeanne crossed her legs, exposing an alarming amount of her crotch. Her honey-blond hair rustled as she shrugged.

“The importance of those who’ve reincarnated and demon meat, revolutionizing the world, demon crossbreeding, the Fremd Torturchen… I see. It would seem there was some carelessness regarding information leaks during the end of days. **But hey, why’s that jackass gotta zero in on all the nasty bits?!**”

“Indeed, and all bits no normal man would even notice, to boot.”

“I know he’s our enemy, but I can’t help but be a little impressed. **No one knows jewel prices like a burglar, huh?**”

Jeanne’s doll-like expression didn’t change in the slightest as she spoke. Elisabeth nodded.

The gears in Izabella’s cheek spun quickly, and she spoke in a tense voice.

“Revolutionizing the world? I don’t fancy the sound of that one bit. Do those people really intend to continue causing these tragedies? We need to figure out their plan so we can adjust the Capital’s defense to match it.”

“I haven’t the faintest. Given that we don’t know the aim behind this revolution of theirs, any conjecture we come up with will be half-baked at best. We dealt with the attackers this time, but I’ve little hope they’ll stop there. However, the abruptness of their appearance makes investigating them difficult. The Capital’s attacker was eaten, and Vyade’s audience chamber is sealed off.”

“What about the demi-humans? Now that I think about it, how’re them shady-ass lizard bastards holdin’ up?”

“No need to worry. We just received word that they’re fine. It would seem they managed to avoid being attacked. However, I’m told they deployed a cannoneer squad to be on the safe side, and La Christoph went to provide them with reinforcements,” said Izabella.

Elisabeth gave Izabella’s answer a nod.

Ever since the end of days, the restrictions on saint dispatches had been dramatically relaxed. Given that La Christoph, the one saint who excelled in both leadership and combat, had gone to help, the demi-humans should be fine.

With that matter settled, Elisabeth got back to thinking. She propped her chin up with an elbow that rested her chin atop her crossed legs; then she closed her eyes.

There was a fire burning up from the bottom of the world. Someone was crying out.

A calamity on par with the end of days was coming, and everyone would be powerless to resist their impending demise.

That grim premonition of hers hadn't changed. Yet she still had no idea how exactly things were going to play out.

I overlooked the gravity of the information on demon crossbreeding. Some Torture Princess I am… Still, though, the fault doesn't lie solely with me—that man's way of thinking is simply perverse.

One might even say he reared hell within his mind.

That was simply how striking the difference between the man in black's thought processes and inventive prowess were from a normal person's. He was similar to a demon in that respect—they, too, exceeded mankind's imagination with ease.

And Elisabeth could think of another person who met that description as well.

…I'd hoped to be able to consign my memories of that man to oblivion, but alas.

She scrunched up her face. However, now was no time to get hung up on personal feelings, and she didn't have the luxury of worrying about what would happen afterward. The sad truth of the matter was that they were woefully short on manpower.

Sometimes, the only thing that could defeat evil was a different brand of evil.

The Torture Princess was evil; there was no doubt about that. But there were realms of evil not even she had transgressed.

Elisabeth gave in and accepted the idea that had flitted through her mind.

"Well, if I must, I must. I'm off. As I said earlier, referencing Kaito's thought process will provide us no help in the slightest. However, there's another individual who may have some insight into our situation."

"You think they can help? Who is it, might I ask?"

"Oh my, how unusual. You would visit the Harlequin of your own accord? **Damn, now there's a sign of the apocalypse if ever I saw one!**"

Maclaeus reacted with curiosity, and Jeanne let out a perversely amused cry. Then catching herself, she clamped her mouth shut and glanced timidly at Izabella. Fortunately for her, though, Izabella was busy trying to figure out who Elisabeth was talking about.

"Whew, thank goodness," Jeanne murmured.

After glancing over at Jeanne, who was playing the part of the henpecked spouse, Elisabeth stood up. She snapped her fingers and

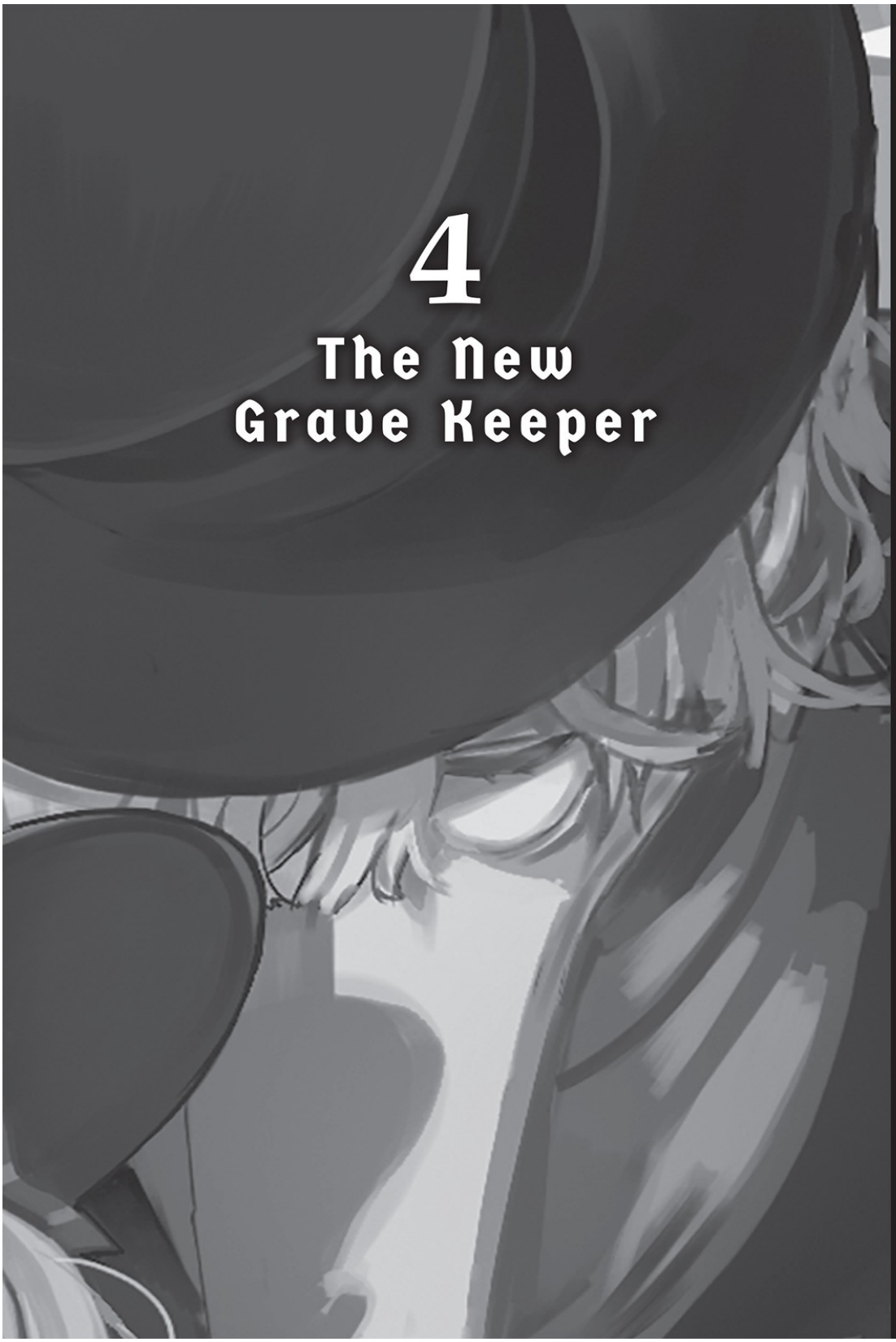
dispelled her chair. Darkness and crimson flower petals whirled up as she gave her answer.

“He Who Rears Hell Within His Mind.”

It was a name given to the man in question by the Kaiser, the most powerful of the fourteen demons. Maclaeus must have been familiar with it, as he immediately gulped. Izabella’s eyes went wide. Jeanne curled her lips ever so slightly.

Elisabeth then finished her reluctant proclamation.

“I’m going to see Vlad Le Fanu.”



4
The New Grave Keeper

4
The New Grave Keeper

I have to write *I'm sorry*.

It sounds so very easy, but it's oh-so-very hard.

The fingers on my right hand got broken, you see, and because of how they knit, I can't bend them very well anymore. They're twisted all funny. And because he peeled my fingernails off, the blood drops get in the way. The cigarette burns hurt, too. My elbows are all swollen, so I can't feel them anymore, but that only makes it scarier. And my tummy is empty, so my body doesn't move the way I want it to. It hurts just holding the pen.

But I'm a bad girl, so none of that matters. I'm a "little shit" who "doesn't know how the world works," so I have to "whip my character into shape" "as fast as possible."

I have to say *I'm sorry*.

I have to write it over and over and over.

Until they forgive me.

But I'm not really sure how to apologize any better.

It doesn't look like there's anyone left in the whole wide world who doesn't think I'm bad.

But if that's the case, then it must mean I've been very, very bad for my whole entire life.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. That's right, I have to apologize.

I have to keep writing it. Even if the paper gets covered in blood. Even if no one forgives me.

But now I don't have anything to write on.

I'm sorry, me. I'm sorry, Sara. I'm, sor, ry.

"I…should have never…been born."

And that's why ——— I became Alice.

*

The man who had burned to death had risen from the ashes. However, that wasn't to say he'd come back to life.

The current Vlad was nothing more than a degraded replica of his soul, which he'd created while he was still alive. Then Kaito Sena had taken that replica and moved it from its jewel home to an artificial body. Even if he hadn't been truly revived, though, any version of Vlad that could move on its own power was a threat to the three races. After all, he was the man who'd

led the fourteen demons and created the Torture Princess. Degraded as he was, his very existence was the embodiment of hell itself.

However, the fact remained that he'd played a key role in saving the world. Without him on their side, defending the World Tree would have been a major challenge.

As a result, opinions were mixed on what to do with him after Kaito Sena passed.

Getting rid of someone they could still use seemed premature, and the self-destruct device Kaito Sena had installed in Vlad's head was still in good working order. Furthermore, the man himself claimed he no longer bore any hostility toward mankind.

"Why did I form a contract with the Kaiser and lead the other thirteen demons on a quest for world domination? I mean, you can call the dream childish, but wasn't it oh-so-splendidly evil? Come now, what kind of villain sees a chance to turn the world on its head and doesn't take it? ...But the living 'me' failed. I'm certainly not immature enough to reattempt a challenge I failed at in my prime, considering my current state. And honestly, I've grown tired of the riffraff anyway. Hmm... You, though, I'm prepared to make an exception for. Tell me, have you ever considered dabbling in dark magic?"

The above was Vlad's testimony from his interview with La Christoph.

Afterward, the Church had decided to leave him "alive." They claimed it was out of respect for Kaito Sena's wishes, but in truth, there was a much more important reason—one that was kept a closely guarded secret from all but a select few.

Either way, though, the fact of the matter was that Vlad was permitted to continue existing. However, he was the kind of person who couldn't help but incite malice in others. Leaving him to his own devices was a recipe for disaster. So as a compromise, it was unanimously decided that Vlad would be imprisoned.

Unless an emergency arose, never again would he see the light of the sun or the twinkle of the stars. However, he never once complained about his treatment. After being confined, he simply took quietly to his new job.

"Here, was it?"

And now in the present, Elisabeth was visiting his place of incarceration.

*

"…Hmm. 'Tis been some time since I was here last."

Elisabeth struck a daunting pose with her arms crossed. A very tall door loomed before her. Long ago, it had been covered with a dangerous barrier that would annihilate any who touched it.

Jeanne had dispelled that barrier, leaving the door unprotected, but it had later been replaced with a less destructive version to prevent anyone from entering. With Izabella and Maclaeus's permission, Elisabeth had

retrieved the new barrier's key. She inserted it into the opening, and when she turned it, the barrier weakened.

When it did, the door swung open with a horrible scream-like *creeeeeeeeeeak*.

A rush of cold air billowed up to meet Elisabeth as she strode inside. She looked around.

Much like the rest of the graveyard, the room looked nothing like its former self. Before, its walls had been covered with ominous feelers on account of the half-white owl, half-pink mass of flesh it had housed. Elisabeth had heard that Izabella had been instrumental in getting the room's grotesque gatekeeper, as well as the victims' corpses from the Room of Pain beyond, interred in a well-ventilated mass grave.

Now, though, the walls of the room created by the Saint were empty of feelers. Their smooth curves, free of joints and seams, were in full view. The room was lit by a number of crystals hanging from its hemispheric ceiling, their gentle flickering reminiscent of a riverbed. One of the walls so lit was home to an amazingly well-crafted carving of the Saint. She was cradling a lump of flesh swaddled in cloth, and her demi-human attendant stood beside her.

Elisabeth let her gaze linger on this attendant. But no matter how long she stared, the carving remained still, and his expression remained hidden beneath his hood. A few seconds later, Elisabeth looked away.

Then as though nothing had happened, she looked toward the center of the room. Coffins belonging to kings of old were lined up one after another atop the wide floor, and there was a single man sitting among the procession of departed royalty.

He was seated atop a luxurious chair and reading his book as if he were the very picture of elegance. He appeared to be alive, yet he seemed oddly accustomed to the deathly silence that surrounded him. He carefully turned the white page over. Then all of a sudden, he snapped his book shut.

A dry noise echoed out from its leather cover. As the book itself transformed into darkness and azure flower petals, the man turned to face her.

"Why hello there, precious daughter of mine. What brings you to this tomb of kings, which holds but death, silence, tedium, and this lone sinner?"

His description of the place was accurate. After the kings' corpses were interred there, the chamber before the Room of Pain at the bottom of the royal graveyard was sealed off. And after being locked away with the dead, Vlad had been given the task of watching over them.

In short, Vlad Le Fanu had been assigned as the new Grave Keeper.

*

If his late predecessor heard of that, the conniptions she'd have might well have proven fatal… No, given that girl, she'd probably just have smiled, then proceeded to wring Vlad's head from his neck.

An idle thought passed through Elisabeth's mind, accompanied by no small amount of exasperation. The girl who'd preceded Vlad had been so pious, it had warped her irredeemably. Taking that fact into account, the succession was ironic in the extreme. However, the new Grave Keeper's role differed greatly from that of previous generations. The First Demon was gone from the tomb, and there was no secret left to hide. At the moment, the Grave Keeper's job was literally just that—to keep the graves.

And thus, Vlad kept an attentive eye out for grave robbers while watching over the dead kings' slumber—which was a roundabout way of saying he spent his days immersed in books. Annoying as it was, he lived a rather refined life for a man in confinement. And as always, he lacked not just piety, but any respect for God whatsoever. Instead of praying for the dead, he was more likely merely to point at them and whisper, *Why, just look at this sad sack of rotting flesh and bone*.

As far as Vlad was concerned, corpses were just objects, and God was just a phenomenon. Elisabeth was inclined to agree with him on both points. Their value systems were actually fairly similar, but she also held a grudge against him so intense that no amount of torturing him would get it out of her system. That said, she, too, was a criminal, and she had no intention of going against the Church's decision and killing him. Instead, she'd decided never to interact with him again. Due to their present unforeseen circumstances, however, she had no choice but to give up on that plan. She opened her mouth, wanting to finish her business and be out of there as soon as possible.

"The human Capital and the second imperial beastfolk princess's residence were attacked by a group using demon grandchildren and someone claiming to be a Torture Princess from another world. Of the assailants, one had a way of thinking that much resembled yours. I'm here to seek your counsel."

"Oh my, my precious daughter, relying on me for help? This assailant must have been quite a scintillating fellow indeed."

Vlad nodded several times, then stood. He gave his fingers an elegant snap, and his chair swirled up into a whirl of azure flower petals and darkness. Vlad, at the vivid, shadowy vortex's center, looked up at the ceiling with a face full of emotion.

"Three years, though? That's a good deal faster than I expected."

Predictably, he bore a demonic smile upon his lips.

⁂

"…You mean to say you *anticipated* this attack?"

“Come now, precious daughter mine, what are you talking about? *It goes without saying that it was obvious, no?*”

Vlad let out a laugh so free of malice that it was actually unsettling. He clearly wanted to express how odd the question had been. As always, he had a perverse talent for getting on people’s nerves. Elisabeth responded with silence.

Vlad strode forward, practically dancing. The hard sound of his footsteps echoed through the room as he passed between the coffins.

“Sooner or later, this was bound to happen—but surely, you knew that, didn’t you? The stage was set. To compare it to a play, all the curtain needed to rise was a suitable actor.”

“True, we let too much information slip out. ’Twould be little surprise for someone to take it and turn it to nefarious—”

“Oh, goodness, no. That’s not even the half of it.”

“…What?”

Elisabeth raised an eyebrow. That wasn’t what she’d expected to hear from him.

Vlad shrugged in a theatrical display of disappointment. He gave his head an exaggerated shake.

“What in the world happened to you? Why, even my dear successor was sharper than that, you know. It’s as though you’ve taken dullness and dullness and piled yet more dullness on top.”

“As always, you talk much but say little—if you’ve something you wish to tell me, then out with it already.”

“Then I shall put it simply, my dear Torture Princess!”

Vlad placed a hand atop his chest and raised his voice like an opera performer. Then after taking a few broad steps forward to close the gap, he brought his face in close to Elisabeth’s.

His crimson eyes gleamed directly before her, and he spoke in a low, sultry whisper.

“Whenever did you go so *soft*?”

“ _____ !”

His voice was full of scorn, and when he exhaled, his long breath lingered on Elisabeth’s lips like a kiss.

The moment he did, she twisted her wrist and pulled a dagger out from a swirl of darkness and crimson flower petals. Then in one fluid motion, she tried to gouge out his flank. He leaped backward to dodge the slash.

He’d clearly anticipated the attack. After looking down and seeing she’d cut his coat’s hem, he nodded.

“Your temper’s still the same as ever, hmm? I must say, I can’t really endorse losing your merits but leaving your flaws. Though, perhaps you’ll be better off this way. Becoming an ignorant sheep and joining the flock will certainly make your life easier; that much is for certain. It’s not the most desirable change for you to make in this situation, though. Not unless you want to find yourself served atop a plate.”

“Yet again, you ramble about insignificant drivel.”

“It’s entirely related! I’m ‘telling you a story’ here! A ‘tale of God and Diablo’!”

Vlad began inflecting his voice as though he was giving a speech. Elisabeth went quiet.

The man was acting like a buffoon. What was frightening, though, was that Vlad was no idiot. There was a good chance that a grain of truth lay festering beneath those nonsensical words of his.

Elisabeth, knowing that, dispelled her dagger. As flower petals cascaded around her, she spoke flatly.

“There are some things only a jester can see clearly. Go on.”

“Three years ago, the world very nearly met a tragic end. However, that seemingly immutable fate was altered by a single person. After burdening himself with God and Diablo, the boy fell into a deep slumber at the World’s End. Thanks to his deeds, the people of the world managed to avoid the apocalypse. The greatest good for the greatest number was, surely, the greatest outcome. One could say they all lived happily ever after. And that would be all well and good.”

But whenever someone’s story ends, there are some things that yet remain.

Vlad raised the corners of his lips, his mouth curled into a crescent smile, and he spread his arms wide. When the light from the crystals struck him, his shadow spread in every direction like the room’s long-absent monster.

“With its lease on life renewed, the world continued on. But the bells would eventually toll on a new curtain’s rise.”

For that is the way bells and curtains are.

His grin was unpleasant, bordering on demonic. Yet for all his posturing, he didn’t seem to have any intention of ever getting to the point. Irritation and bloodlust swelled within Elisabeth. Vlad, perhaps sensing that, changed his tone.

“And oh, how they toll! Come now, precious daughter mine, think about it for a moment. God and Diablo—entities with the power to destroy and rebuild worlds—exist. And now all three races are fully aware of their existence!”

“Aye, they are…but surely, that goes without saying by this point, no?”

“Ah, but look at it this way—now everyone knows there’s a way to destroy the world.”

“ _____ !”

Elisabeth gasped. No normal person would have arrived at that realization. But of all the people who’d been narrowly saved and were now diligently going about their lives, the man before her, and he alone, saw things in a wholly different light.

Vlad, speaking as evil incarnate, continued.

“Sharing details on the particulars was an error, to be sure. But the true menace, the true threat, was the survivors’ changed perception. Now everyone knows that the world is ‘something that can be ended.’ The end of days is no longer a pipe dream or a legend. *It’s oh-so-very real.*”

Had you really never noticed just how horrifying that was?

He's right—after the end of days was averted, people began conceiving of the world differently.

Vlad's voice was tender and filled with a sort of pity. Elisabeth squeezed her fists tight.

She and the Church had tried to purge information on the fourteen demons' uprising, but even that paled in comparison with the gravity of knowing that the end of days was something that people could cause. It was the kind of information that *changed how people viewed the world*. And as the man in black had said, *"the true value of information lies in its ability to set people's minds in motion."*

"So not only was this situation bound to arise, and not only is it occurring as we speak, but it will *keep happening*—is that what you mean to say?"

"That it is. *The end of days cometh, and destroying the world is an attainable feat.* With that fact proven, people will undoubtedly come out of the woodwork to try it for themselves. And in a sense, they won't even be doing it maliciously. For you see…"

Vlad deepened his unpleasant smile. Then in his most irreverent tone yet, he gave his sinister proclamation.

"…what kind of villain sees a chance to turn the world on its head and doesn't take it?"

*

"You understand now, I hope. The calamities will keep coming, and the world will yet again find itself cowering as the end of days' footsteps draw ever nearer. Of course, my dear successor is the one who sealed away God and Diablo, those with dominion over reconstruction and destruction, so the process and conclusion will depend greatly on how he's handled. For now, though, our efforts would be best focused on dealing with the crisis at hand. No sense worrying about the future when we're about to join these pitiable fools, after all."

Vlad gave the coffins a pointed glance and let out a contemptuous laugh. Elisabeth nodded.

Now wasn't the time to figure out what they were eventually going to do about Kaito. She forced herself to think about something else.

The fact that a number of people had reported seeing the ghost of mankind's third king while they were getting rid of the Saint statues and moving the coffins came to mind. Given the new Grave Keeper's attitude, though, it seemed only reasonable. Meanwhile, Vlad continued talking.

"Now then, with my considerable detour out of the way, let us turn our thoughts to the attackers, shall we? This man in black wearing a bisected crow mask, this Fremd Torturchen, and this impression you had of them as being 'tyrannized'… I must say, it's all most fascinating, and all deeply

troubling. If they were mere villains, it would have been one thing, but if they're avengers, then it's a whole different story entirely. The more righteous a man's motives, the deeper his obsession and the crueler his methods."

"Avengers, eh. Hmm… Hmm? Now just wait a moment…"

Elisabeth cut herself off midthought. Something about Vlad's words had caught her attention.

As of yet, she hadn't told him any specifics about the attackers, yet he'd made a direct reference to one of their appearances. With an obvious "oops," he went silent. Elisabeth let out a deep sigh.

"Ah yes, I should have known you wouldn't just sit down here quietly. You're eavesdropping on the entire graveyard, I take it?"

"Ha-ha-ha, it's an honor indeed that you're as sharp as ever when it comes to me, my precious. Guilty as charged! Please, you didn't think literature would be enough to stave off my boredom, did you?"

Vlad snapped his fingers, and the book from before plopped down into his hand. He proudly opened up its leather cover. Letters were scrawling themselves automatically onto its white pages. Presumably, they were writing out conversations occurring within the castle. And upon closer inspection, the cover wasn't leather at all. It was made of countless sheets of processed human skin pressed together.

Vlad snapped the book shut. It transformed into flower petals as he spoke.

"It's a magical device I made during my life that I was fortunate enough to avoid having confiscated. Thanks to this little number, I've assembled enough blackmail material to make dozens of the castle's staff into my pawns. Delightful, isn't it, how people of every social standing have just as many flaws?"

"Ah, I understand now. Truly, there really is no option but to cut you down and burn your remains to ash."

"Oh dear, precious, don't trouble yourself. I'm well aware of how your sensational moniker and garb clash with your strange overabundance of scruples, but I ask that you overlook this indiscretion of mine. I burned to death once already, and I can't say I fancied it."

Vlad raised his hands in surrender. Elisabeth glared daggers at him. For as volatile as the situation looked, though, neither of them was actually being serious. If Vlad's speech had been a solo act, then their little exchange was akin to its intermission. Vlad was annoyingly fond of verbally sparring with his "beloved daughter," and Elisabeth, knowing that, had chosen her words so as to entice him into coughing up more information.

Sure enough, Vlad playfully closed an eye and placed a finger atop his lips.

"All right, all right. Ah, what a helpless child you are."

"Don't take that affectionate tone with me. I'll torture you till you breathe your last."

“Hmm, your bloodlust is a little more on the nose than I’d expected. Ah well, tolerating his daughter’s rebellion is the mark of an ideal father, so I suppose I’d best give you my helpful warning anyhow. And in exchange, you can overlook my little hobby. How does that sound?”

“Not information, but a warning, eh? I haven’t the foggiest idea what you’re getting at, but very well. If this warning of yours proves useful, I’m prepared to consider it. Prove your worth, and you may yet keep your head.”

“Then here it is—would the likes of Vyade’s suicide bombing have been enough to kill you?”

Suddenly, Vlad’s voice grew very quiet and very cold. Elisabeth’s eyes went wide.

His words were a slight against the dead, and if Kaito Sena were there, he probably would have gotten mad. But Elisabeth didn’t care about that. Her memories of what transpired in the audience chamber raced through her mind.

The plant inside the crystal had grown explosively, filling every nook and cranny of the room without giving those inside a moment to escape. However, she herself had once fought her way through a similar situation. In the Capital, she’d survived a blistering-fast avalanche of flesh pouring down upon her. There were any number of ways she could think of to survive the vines.

However, Vlad’s vague statement was hinting at something even more specific.

Elisabeth dug even deeper through her memories, just to be certain. The cheeky face of Alice—the girl calling herself the Fremd Torturchen—floated vividly to the forefront of her mind. Elisabeth came to an abrupt realization.

I see… As the Torture Princess, I really have gone soft.

Even the dullest knife would have been sharper than her. How could she not have seen it?

“…Humpty Dumpty.”

“Precisely. Once it breaks, ‘all the king’s horses and all the king’s men can’t put it back together again.’ But unless it ‘has a great fall,’ that break will never come.”

If those two were still alive, the entire situation was fundamentally different.

Elisabeth immediately spun on her heel. When she broke off into a run, she ended up kicking one of the coffins. It looked as though she’d dislodged the third king’s lid, but that was hardly her concern. She shot off like an arrow.

Vlad’s voice came chasing after her, his low, smooth bass bouncing off the walls and striking her from all directions.

“Seeing someone beautiful succumb to sentimentality is like gazing at a work of art. And if they were a cruel woman, then all the more so. But as you are now, my precious, you’re hideous. Back when you were filled with

grim resolve, you were far lovelier, far greater, far more radiant, and far more beautiful."

Elisabeth almost yelled back for him to silence his fool mouth, but she held her tongue. It was only reasonable that he'd mock her—the Torture Princess had grown as slow as a heifer. She had no comeback. When Vlad went on, though, his voice was tinged with sadness.

"I thought you swore a vow."

You were the Torture Princess, Elisabeth Le Fanu. The proud wolf and the lowly sow. You were to live the cruel and haughty life of a wolf, then die like a lowly sow.

Ah, that was my vow—and my pride.

The Torture Princess's lot was to be cursed by all, shunned by all, despised by all, and to accept her unseemly fate of dying alone.

And at the same time, she had the cold resignation required to shrug off anyone's death, no matter who had passed. On a long enough timeline, everyone would die. Nobody would be saved—they would all became carrion alike. And until then, all they could do was choose a way of living and carry it out.

Even if that way carried a gruesome end befitting their life's ugliness.

Such is the proper way of things, so when did I get so—?

Elisabeth shook her head to clear the muddy, unproductive thoughts from it. Losing her composure and debasing herself any further would be unforgivable. After swallowing down her self-loathing and disparagement, she reached for the door.

The moment she did, it opened of its own accord. She stopped in her tracks so as not to crash into the honey-blond radiance before her.

The other party spoke in a voice as hard and high as a bell's chime.

"Now this is a rare sight, lady. Not every day I see your ass runnin' around all flustered."

"Jeanne, hmm? What are you doing down here?"

"Oh, did you hear the news already? Eh, I figured the punk woulda been eavesdropping on us."

"If you knew, then why not *do* something about it?! …Wait, what news?"

What now?

Elisabeth asked her question, her voice low. Jeanne's honey-blond hair rustled as she blinked her rose-red eyes. Her doll-like beauty remained wholly undisturbed as she spoke flatly.

"We received word from a number of sources all at once. First, they detected a massive magical reaction at Vyade's residence. Immediately thereafter, a man wearing all black and a girl wearing a frilly dress appeared in the demi-human lands. A battle broke out, and the demi-human side lost. I'm told that La Christoph was taken hostage in exchange for the safety of their royalty, officials, and highest-grade pureblood citizens."

Elisabeth clicked her tongue. Thanks to her oversight, the situation had taken a drastic turn for the worse. However, she didn't have time to lament

her foolishness. Jeanne slumped her head to the side. When she went on, her voice was just as cold and unfeeling as before.

“Our enemies have requested to see you, alone. **So what’s the plan, li’l princess?**”

Will you go—

—or won’t you?

Song of Prayer Sung the Desert Over

Ahrasa Aina, o'er the Dragons' Graveyard, the sun rises and flashes
Ahrasa Aréna, blistering sands wash over her cold silver ashes
Our home is built on golden sand, burning winds surround our land
Deep within our tall stone walls, protecting one treasure is our sole call
A body unheld by death's fell claim, a radiant form, and a glittering frame
Deep within an eternal sleep, her ever-closed eyes watch over her sheep
Ensuring all her descendants are honest and true and good and resplendent
Please, my queen, know it is true, believe in us as we believe in you
Ahrasa Aina, o'er the Dragons' Graveyard, the sun rises and flashes
Ahrasa Aréna, blistering sands wash over her cold silver ashes
Her body lies in the graveyard interred, each day marked by peaceful dreams heard
May this fleeting period continue to last, and may none appear to disturb her rest
Ahrasa Aina, blessings unto thee
Ahrasa Aréna, blessings unto thee

Epigraph recorded in *The Legend of the Sand Queen*

All ye children who bear the Sand Queen's blood
It is our task to tell her tale
Even if our lives were to cease and end.
She bears a different form from ours
Adorned with reddened scales
Like beautiful stones, our eternal protector
Even in slumber
She is with us always
And her name is [redacted]

5
Wonderland

5
Wonderland

I wanted to have a talk with you.

Amicably, as a pair of friends would.

You probably don't know who I am. Just as a human wouldn't know the name of a bug crawling on the ground. But I know who you are. Just as even livestock on their way to the market would hear the name of a saint.

Such is the difference between the value of your life and mine.

I know that all too well. But facts are facts, nothing more. It isn't the saints' fault, and it isn't your sin to shoulder.

I'm not here to reproach you, not in the slightest. I just want to talk.

As I said, amicably. As a pair of friends would.

You and I can grow close. I'm certain of it. Though, ever since I lost my friend in childhood, I've never grown close to anyone. As such, I have no proof. But I really hope you'll believe that my desire to get closer with you is genuine… Thank you. Your understanding means the world to me.

Hmm? Why you, you ask? It's simple.

You too are weak, and you too have had everything taken from you.

Do you find it humiliating, being pitied by me? No? Ah, of course, you would never take it that way. But you say you don't understand what I mean? I must say, I find your line of thinking rather hard to follow.

As I see it, you saints have had so much taken from you.

Take you, for example.

Where did your lungs vanish to? When was your heart absconded with? What became of the flesh carved from your chest? As a human being, was your life not degraded? Have you never lamented that fact?

If only God were more merciful.

Were that the case, there might have been another way.

Will you pray for me? Will you cry for me? Will you grieve for me, as one would lament a close friend's tragedy? I don't need forgiveness. I would never ask that of anyone. But even I have times when I want a close, distant friend to whisper in my ear. To whisper, *This was the only way*, so that I might find some delusive reassurance.

What do you say to that?

What do you say, La Christoph?

*

The demi-human lands were home to golden sand, harsh winds, burning liquids, myriad minerals mass-produced in the Dragons' Graveyard—and towering stone walls.

They weren't built to keep enemies out. They were barriers designed to prevent mixed-blood children from being born. Demi-humans were segregated into different sectors based on the purity of their blood, and residents weren't allowed to travel freely between them.

Elisabeth's destination was the first sector, home to the demi-humans with the purest blood.

Crimson flowers and black miasma swirled around her as she landed atop the rough, sandy cobble.

"Now, then."

She glanced around. The people permitted to live here were all wealthy. Their sandstone houses were decorated with jewel-and-metal charms, hand-sewn sunshades, and various succulents. However, every door was shut tight, and there were no signs of anyone being inside. Elisabeth frowned.

As I recall, the main massacre during the end of days was in the third sector, but the first didn't exactly get off scot-free, either.

Still, it had been three years since then. For the most part, the corpses had been buried, the buildings had been repaired, and the residents had had time to recover emotionally. Even so, it was dead quiet despite being near dawn.

It was as though all the residents had been wiped out.

Elisabeth was no stranger to ghost towns. There was the Torture Princess's hometown, for one. She'd turned that city into a graveyard with her own two hands. However, she thought a little more.

If the demi-humans had truly suffered such monumental losses, we'd have heard of it by now.

As far as she knew, no slaughter had taken place there.

The man in black and the Fremd Torturchen seemed to have learned from their failed initial attempt to recruit her.

This time, they'd gotten La Christoph to surrender by guaranteeing their hostages' safety in return. At the moment, most of the ruling class was imprisoned in the temple that housed the Sand Queen's body. Apparently, the rest of the highest-grade pureblood citizens, as well as the slightly lower-grade citizens, had been ordered not to leave their homes. That explained the silence.

There was no way they could make a move, not while their enemies were using the high-ranking purebloods and the temple itself as shields. Outside blood purity, the temple was the only other thing the demi-humans held in the highest esteem. After all, the Sand Queen's corpse was interred beneath it.

The Sand Queen was the mother to all demi-human kind, and her shrine had been built from the bones of her close relatives. Some of the pillars had mineralized into gems, earning the shrine a reputation for its solemnity and

beauty. However, Elisabeth would be hard-pressed to approach the building in question and save the captives. If she went near the temple, all the hostages would be killed. That was the arrangement.

Until now, the demi-humans have firmly refused to allow any human visitors to the first sector. The Mad King's relief efforts during the end of days mark the sole exception to that rule.

Now those same demi-humans were in a position where one wrong move by the Torture Princess—a criminal from another race—could cost them many of their race's purest-blooded members. It was ironic, really. However, Elisabeth couldn't exactly take their xenophobic neighbor's fate lightly.

She began walking forward.

The main road leading to the palace was dyed vermilion, and painted atop that hue, there was an intricate array of other vibrant colors. It was an illustrated depiction of the demi-humans' history, redrawn and added to with every festival they held. A hard *click* echoed out with each step Elisabeth took upon it.

Her high heels chipped at the paint as she strode on.

To build the palace, they'd taken cuts of a special type of rock, processed them, and laid them out in a rising corkscrew pattern made through painstaking calculations. It gleamed like a spiral shell under the light of the desert night's countless shining stars. Under normal circumstances, no human would ever get to gaze upon its majesty.

The Torture Princess's black hair fluttered as she approached the rainbow-colored building. She was following the rebels' instructions to the letter.

Ironically enough, the spectacle unfurling before her was like a scene out of an illustrated history in and of itself.

*

"Our enemies have requested to see you, alone. **So what's the plan, li'l princess?**"

"I'll go."

A few hours before landing in the demi-human lands, Elisabeth had answered Jeanne's question without hesitation.

The golden Torture Princess narrowed her rosy eyes. That was her sole reaction. It would seem this was the answer she'd anticipated. Elisabeth passed through the door and strode down the corridor. Jeanne followed after her and muttered:

"That's probably our best option, yes. **Can't say I love kowtowin', but still.** If you refused and La Christoph and the demi-human royalty were killed, no amount of diplomacy could smooth that over. The demi-humans might even mount an invasion. **Even if we stamped out these attackers,**

we'd still be in for a hell of a bloodbath! Fuck, man, race relations are a headache and a half!"

"They are what they are. Even within a given race, people's political views, religions, beliefs, and moral systems differ. Trying to understand another completely is a fool's errand. So when two races interact, their ideological walls are steeper still… Not that I don't have my misgivings about the demi-humans' obsession with blood purity, mind you. It makes them predicable, which in turn makes them vulnerable."

Elisabeth gave her answer in a low tone. To put it bluntly, the demi-humans took things too far. The Sand Queen had died long ago. But while it was true that the other races had difficulty appreciating the demi-humans' lament at having their bloodlines gradually thin out, that was no reason to be as obstinately vocal about it as they were.

It makes for too great a target. 'Tis akin to leaving one's throat bare and exposed. Fools, the lot of them. Yet still…

If not for Elisabeth's fatal oversight, she would have been able to block the metaphorical knife. That fault, if nothing else, was hers to own up to. As Elisabeth began collecting her thoughts, Jeanne spoke up from behind her.

"So what specifically is your plan?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Come now, don't go playin' dumb with me, fair lady. What, you're just gonna stroll in like they told you to and call it a day? Please. You're a lotta things, but an honest gal ain't one of 'em."

Jeanne's voice was as dry as ever, but her words were biting and rough. Elisabeth curled the corners of her mouth upward.

There were a lot of things about Jeanne de Rais that were unsuited for one who bore the moniker of *Torture Princess*. Even so, the golden Torture Princess understood the ebony Torture Princess better than most.

Elisabeth's black hair fluttered as she turned around. She spoke, her voice practically a song.

"Listen well, Jeanne. I intend to head for the demi-human lands, exactly as demanded. But in the meantime…"

"Oh, wow, goodness me. I never even dreamed that you'd actually come on your own!"

A voice younger than Jeanne's struck Elisabeth's eardrums.

The moment it did, Elisabeth's vacant recollection came to an end.

After she passed through the palace's gate, the vermilion cobble gave way to lapis-lazuli tiling as she emerged into its front garden. Flowers and trees had been planted all along the meandering path in high-grade, water-rich black soil that looked to have been sourced from the beastfolk lands. Flashes of sleek leopards and showy peafowls could be seen peeking through the verdant-green leaves. A stone, flower-shaped fountain shot bursts of water high into the air.

An immaculate white figure stood at the center of that veritable paradise.

At the edge of Elisabeth's vision, the Fremd Torturchen—Alice Carroll—gave a little hop.

"How surprising! What a truly surprising event! Why, it's like you appeared out of nowhere!"

"You're one to talk. I never expected to encounter you quite so quickly."

Elisabeth frowned. They'd called for their enemy, so the girl should have been by her father's side. Elisabeth wondered what she'd been doing, but it soon became clear that she'd spent her time picking flowers.

After lifting up her skirt's hem to turn it into a makeshift pouch, she'd stuffed it full of large white lilies. Given the desert outside, just thinking of how much they must have cost was frightening in its own right. Alice, seeming to have come to some sort of realization, nodded.

"Okay, I got it! Now that you're here, I don't have to kill time anymore! Hooray!"

"Hmm?"

Alice sprang upward like a rabbit. Her blue dress flapped up and down precariously, causing the white flowers within to go flying through the air. As Alice landed among the twirling lilies, she beamed.

"Why, you aren't even late. That's very impressive, Elisabeth. It's very impressive, and you have my praise."

Alice puffed up her chest in a simultaneous display of both innocence and haughtiness. However, she quickly moved to smooth out her dress. After hastily getting it in order, she bent one knee and gave Elisabeth an elegant curtsy.

"Welcome, Elisabeth. Welcome to Wonderland."

The Torture Princess was making no efforts to hide her hostility. Yet not only had Alice invited her, but she was also welcoming her with open arms.

It was a terribly wondrous act, and one that reflected poorly on the sanity of the performer.

*

"I'm late, I'm late!"

Alice shouted in a high-pitched voice as she ran. The white ribbons on her hat flopped about like a pair of rabbit ears.

After welcoming Elisabeth, she'd abruptly taken her hand and broken into a run. Allegedly, she was taking Elisabeth to see someone called "Lewis." Realizing there was no sense fighting as long as the hostages were there, Elisabeth obediently followed along. Still, there was something decidedly eerie about the innocent figure Alice cast when she ran. And to compound on that, she repeated her shout at regular intervals.

"I'm late, I'm late!"

"If you really are as late as you say, it's clearly due to these incessant detours you insist on taking."

Even after Elisabeth pointed that out, though, Alice continued meandering undeterred. That whole time, she'd been taking one pointless action after another. As they approached the palace proper, the tiles before them began having snakeskin patterns burned into them. Now Alice was dashing over the patterns as though tracing them with her feet. The next moment, though, she took a sharp turn and rushed back into the garden.

Elisabeth, naturally, was about to make her displeasure known, but Alice spoke first.

"Oh, it's bread-and-butterflies!"

"What?"

Alice's statements were growing increasingly nonsensical. She was looking at some sort of netted enclosure. She charged in at full speed, dragging Elisabeth along with her.

The moment she did, Elisabeth's vision was arrested by vivid colors. A massive swarm of butterflies was dancing through the air. The palace's residents had probably gathered and raised them for entertainment. It made for a beautiful spectacle, like a scene right out of a dream.

Alice let out a cry of joy. After waving her pale palms about, she managed to catch one.

There came an awful splattering sound. Elisabeth winced.

Without a moment of hesitation, Alice had crushed the butterfly's abdomen. As it twitched and convulsed, she plucked off its wings as well. The four purple flakes fell to the ground, and Alice laughed as she stomped on them.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Hee-hee-hee-hee! Ah-ha-ha-ha, ah-ha-ha-ha, ah…… I'm bored now."

"…Hmm."

Then she suddenly went sullen. She gave Elisabeth's hand a tug, then began walking. As Elisabeth watched the dejected Alice, she arrived at a theory.

Between this and her behavior back in the beastfolk lands, her having "the cruelty particular to children" seems hardly sufficient to explain her actions.

Alice Carroll was broken.

It was unclear whether she could be fixed or not, but Elisabeth didn't care one way or the other. Neither would change the fact that Alice was her enemy. It merely caught her attention a little.

"Next, we're going this way! 'Cause after that, we're going that way!"

Furthermore, Alice herself didn't seem to realize they were enemies. Instead, she was dragging Elisabeth around like a close friend. Their enigmatic dash through the thicket labyrinth continued.

Eventually, though, Alice came to a stop before the palace's third detached villa.

*

"Ta-daa, we made it! Look, Elisabeth, we're here!"

“For someone who went out of her way to call me here, you certainly took your sweet time.”

Elisabeth responded to Alice’s excited shout with a sigh. She looked up at the building standing before them. It was a lavish manor sporting a narrow, distinctive watchtower. Elisabeth thought back over the blueprint she’d made sure to memorize before coming.

The residence for the king’s concubines, eh.

The demi-human king played no role in politics. Governing the nation was a task left to a group of officials selected from the highest-ranking pureblood citizens. The king’s role was twofold—to serve as a symbol and to take pureblooded wives. In order to maintain his bloodline, polygamy was not only allowed but also encouraged, and it was their custom for him to marry one member of each governing official’s family.

The back gate’s handle was adorned with a delicate garland design. Alice grabbed it and pulled. The concubines weren’t allowed to leave the inner courtyard on their own, so there was normally a servant outside in charge of opening and closing the gate.

To that end, it was made of an incredibly heavy material. Yet for some reason, Alice declined to use magic as she struggled to try and open it.

“*Mmph*, come on. See, Father’s in the middle of a ‘serious adult talk’ right now, and it was so boring that it made me yawn. But don’t worry. When he hears you’re here, I’m sure, I’m suuuure he’ll be thrilled! My, this door is heavy! But if I use magic, it’ll feel like I cheated. Oh, and I found some candied flowers that you’d absolutely love, so I’ll share them with you later, and we can have a tea party.”

“Oy, Sara Yuuki.”

Alice immediately went silent, and her cheerful energy vanished. A long, heavy silence descended on them.

Eventually, the Fremd Torturchen, still facing forward, replied:

“I got rid of that name…or rather, that name belongs to a dead girl. You can call it, but no one will answer.”

“Yet you did answer… In any case, I’ve something I want to ask you.”

“Something you want to ask ‘Alice’? Or something you want to ask ‘Sara Yuuki’?”

“I see no difference.”

“Oh, no, they’re different. They’re completely different, totally different, wildly different.”

Without turning around, Alice shook her head. Her hat’s white ribbons shook along with it.

Elisabeth let out a small snort, then forcibly continued her line of questioning.

“Aye, no difference at all—but anyhow, are you an Unsullied Soul, as Kaito was?”

“What a strange question, Elisabeth. It’s like one of the riddles from the Caterpillar on the mushroom. What’s a Sinless Soul? What does it mean to

not have any sin? Who gets to decide who has sin and who doesn't? Am I, Alice, guilty or innocent? Are you the Queen of Hearts? If that's the case, then I must say I've been rather impolite."

"Don't try to dodge the question by spouting gibberish. What I ask is this: Did you die after being subjected to cruelty and torture despite committing no sins that would warrant such treatment?"

Alice went quiet again. All that strength drained from her body, and her arms slumped loosely by her sides.

That was answer enough.

She didn't need to say a word. Elisabeth could tell. However, Alice quickly spun around, her vigor restored. With a bizarrely cheerful energy, she launched into another prattling speech.

"I never did anything bad. But even though I was doing the exact same things as when I was a good girl, they kept making me into a bad girl. I kept apologizing, but it never mattered. Nobody in the whole wide world told me that I wasn't bad. And then down, down, down. Alice fell down a very deep hole. Even though I wasn't chasing a White Rabbit. But at its end, I found Wonderland. See, it's simple, right?"

"As I suspected… 'Summoning from another world a soul that's accustomed to pain, placing it in an immortal body, and making it form a contract with a demon.' That 'Father' of yours noticed the importance behind the act. That explains why he selected you. No doubt he chose someone younger than Kaito so they'd be easier to manipulate… What a pitiful creature you are."

Elisabeth shook her head. Her impression of Alice as "someone who'd been oppressed" had been affirmed once more. She casually thought back on Vlad's words.

"But if they're avengers, then it's a whole different story entirely. The more righteous a man's motives, the deeper his obsession and the crueler his methods."

Avengers, eh.

Alice offered no response to Elisabeth's assessment. She twirled back toward the door and grabbed its handle once more. This time, though, she used magic to strengthen her body. The door slowly began opening.

"Who cares?! Why, who cares, indeed! Elisabeth, your story is boring! So cut it out! I won't listen anymore, so stop talking about it!"

Alice shouted childishly. The door opened even farther.

As it did, a strange odor came wafting from within. It was the sweet smell of incense mixed with the rusty smell of blood. And when Elisabeth looked down, she quickly found its source.

The blood leaking out from inside the villa shone darkly.

"If you don't…I'll kill you, too."

Alice swiveled her head around and looked up at her at a peculiar angle.

Elisabeth ignored Alice's red eyes. Instead, she squinted into the darkness beyond the gate.

We heard no reports of the demi-humans suffering monumental losses, and true enough, no massacre took place here. Yet still…

…that certainly didn't mean there were no victims.

Within the villa, some demi-humans had been killed.

What had transpired wasn't readily apparent, but what was clear was that the victims had been thoroughly disposed of.

Had they been soldiers? Concubines? What little remained of them wasn't enough to determine even that. Even their genders were unclear. In fact, the only evidence they'd even been demi-humans at all were the few scales mixed in with the shredded flesh.

Not only had the bodies been dissected, but they'd also been scattered all over the place.

There were hearts resting on windowsills, eyeballs lining the hallway and stuffed into doors' peepholes, intestines wound around decorative pillars, lungs hammered into walls, and fangs, still attached to gums, strewn across the ground like pebbles.

Elisabeth recalled the ravaged lilies and crushed butterfly.

With the grisly spectacle at her back, Alice spoke.

"But hey, hey, Elisabeth, can you tell me something?"

"What is it? Ask away."

Elisabeth replied to the question with indifference and feigned geniality.

Alice smiled, as though accepting some sort of challenge. She intertwined her fingers behind her back and swayed from side to side.

"Why's it wrong to do unto others as I had done unto me?"

A cunning sort of malice lurked within the depths of her childish voice. Elisabeth knew it all too well.

That was the kind of malice that flowed from festering wounds—the kind of hatred that was borne from pain.

*

It's time for a story. A little story about a simple equation.

Let's say we have "someone who was cruelly oppressed" and "someone who gleefully oppressed them." The former will never forgive the latter, no matter what they say or do. There's a pretty clear answer to this equation. You multiply hate by resentment, then subtract those pesky ethics. Then once the first party gets their revenge on the second party, the story comes to an end.

And they all live happily ever after. But here, though, we add another parameter.

One that throws the whole situation into chaos. The new parameter is as follows.

Let's say we have "people who did nothing" and "people who knew nothing."

Let’s say we have a generous, open-hearted world that allows the ignorance to persist, saying, *These things just happen*.

Now, how do we solve that one? It looks tricky, doesn’t it? But there’s no need to think that hard.

All you have to do is cut through all the tangled-up strings.

In other words—

—that is what it means to hate the world itself.

However…

“I answer you thus.”

“Ah, you’re here.”

Elisabeth had begun answering Alice’s question, but before she could finish, a male voice cut her off.

Elisabeth looked through the doorway. All the lights up to where the hallway turned a corner were out. Little piles of viscera were scattered about the darkness like landmarks.

Suddenly, a foot appeared and stomped one of the piles flat. Rotting flesh and blood sprayed up into the air.

The man in black strode forward, practically appearing to coalesce out of the darkness. He slowly looked up. His mask, so crisp and white that it looked like an exposed cheekbone, cut through the black.

“Father!”

Alice let out a cheerful cry and dashed forward. As she ran toward the man, she trampled the floor and demi-human guts alike underfoot. Dark blood on the verge of coagulation sprayed about in her wake.

Alice’s shoes got soiled, but she didn’t seem to mind in the slightest. She embraced the man and dangled from his neck. Her hat’s ribbons flapped around joyfully.

“Father, Father, listen! Elisabeth was being horrid! She was talking about all sorts of confusing, incomprehensible things that I didn’t understand in the slightest! Why, I was so annoyed that I almost squashed her flat!”

“Settle down, Alice. Given your current strength, trying to ‘squash Elisabeth flat,’ as you put it, would be altogether too reckless. Also, it appears you left your body magically strengthened when you started hanging from my neck. Is that so?”

“Oh, is it? Why, it is! Oh no…did…I?”

“You snapped my neck a little, yes. If I hadn’t anticipated it ahead of time and used magic to reinforce it, I’d be dead right now.”

“That would be bad! Very, very bad! I’m ever so sorry, Father. Does it hurt?”

“As I said, it’s nothing serious. Just make sure to be more careful from now on.”

Once again, the two of them were having a very serious, very stupid exchange. Elisabeth was dumbstruck. Yet at the same time, she felt a strange sense of eeriness that she couldn’t quite put into words.

'Tis hardly the type of conversation suitable to be carried out before massacred corpses.

In other words, it wasn't just Alice. The man in black was fundamentally broken, too.

The word *avenger* ran through Elisabeth's head again. As it did, the exchange continued. After Alice obediently hopped down, the man in black laid his hands atop her shoulders and asked her a highly amusing question in a highly serious tone.

"And besides, think back. Haven't you yourself been forcing Elisabeth to listen to confusing, incomprehensible things this whole time?"

"Ah…"

"Aye, it's as you say. She started by repeating 'I'm late' over and over, which, while comprehensible, was certainly confusing…but then she started going on about bread-and-butterflies, and Queens of Hearts, and not chasing White Rabbits, and Wonderland, at which point she completely lost me."

Elisabeth nodded. Alice began looking visibly embarrassed. It would appear that she'd been cognizant of how little sense she'd been making. Eventually, the man in black shook his head to reprimand her.

"Alice, I've told you time and again. People from this world aren't familiar with your *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* stories. If you want to talk about them, you need to at least start by outlining the plot. You're the one who wanted to become a lady, weren't you? If so, thoughtlessly confusing people is no way to go about it."

"I-I'm sorry, Father… I guess I wasn't thinking."

"Am I the one you should be giving that apology to?"

"Oh, no, you're absolutely right! …I'm sorry, Elisabeth. It turns out that I was the one talking about confusing, incomprehensible things. I hope you'll forgive me."

"I don't even know where to begin with you two."

Elisabeth's bewilderment had evolved into a full-fledged headache. She squeezed the bridge of her nose.

The man stroked Alice's cheek to praise her for apologizing properly. She cooed like a happy little puppy. A moment later, though, the man tore his eyes from her innocent smile.

Just like last time, the gaze he cast Elisabeth's way was full of sympathy. She shot him a frigid stare in return. He then placed his hand atop his chest and gave her a gentlemanly bow.

"I apologize for calling you such a long way, Elisabeth Le Fanu. However, it's as I said before. 'In order to discuss particulars, we should first change locale.' Now we can finally talk things over at a comfortable pace."

"'Talk things over,' eh…? Before that, I have a question. Is La Christoph unharmed?"

"Of course. He, too, is someone important for us to talk to."

The man in black answered matter-of-factly. Elisabeth frowned. She hadn't expected for them to care about La Christoph as anything other than a hostage. He was the saints' representative, and Elisabeth was the Torture Princess. It was unclear what criteria the man in black had used to select them. If he deemed them important, though, then it was probably safe to assume he found some value in speaking to them.

For now, 'tis essential I gather more information.

"Then talk we shall. So? What is it you wish to speak of?"

"It should be obvious."

The man then turned without actually answering her question. His black longcoat fluttered behind him as he strode off.

Alice rushed after, then leaped toward him. She grabbed his arm and dangled from it. A nasty popping sound resounded from his shoulder, but he marched on undeterred. Clearly, he wanted everyone to follow him farther inside the villa.

I'll likely be left with no way to flee… On the other hand…

There wasn't any point in staying. Elisabeth nodded and followed after them. Partway through, however, she unconsciously narrowed her eyes. Alice and the man in black were making no efforts to sidestep the body parts scattered across the floor.

Broken fangs shattered. Intestines ejected their spoiled contents. Lips were crushed flat.

The sight was peaceful yet cruel, cheery yet grim. The two of them were striding through hell, as happy as could be.

Still facing forward, the man finished his truncated answer.

It's time for a story.

What kind of story, you ask?

"A story of repentance, dreams—

"—and hatred.

*

"We're here. Please, after you."

The man stopped in front of a simple door. Unlike the others, it didn't have a peephole. After he spoke, Alice courteously opened the door up. Elisabeth's shoes clicked loudly as she walked in.

Inside, the entire room was pure-white.

The walls, floor, and ceiling were all covered in a white, plaster-like coating. The only furniture in the room was the single, cabriole-legged chair at its center. The demi-humans tended to prefer their furniture a little sturdier than that, so it had presumably been brought in after the fact. Originally, the room must not have had any furniture at all.

That struck Elisabeth as peculiar. Aside from festivals, the concubines spent their entire lives in the villa. As such, all the rooms were outfitted

with lavish, elaborate interiors befitting the fact that it was their final abode. Yet that room alone was different.

Elisabeth glanced around to try and suss out its purpose. Then she suddenly noticed the strange shading on the walls. They were adorned with a carving of the Sand Queen, which covered the entire room.

If you knelt in the middle of the floor, it was positioned such that she was cradling you like an egg.

I see… 'Tis a room for prayer and meditation.

Satisfied with that explanation, Elisabeth then turned her gaze to the chair. It had a strange individual sitting atop it.

The man had broad shoulders and a well-built physique, and his white outfit was long enough that it trailed on the ground. Its hem and his thick, straight black hair formed a pair of circles on the floor. However, his true peculiarity lay elsewhere.

For one, he had a set of crude chains binding his arms such that he was embracing himself.

Elisabeth knew he hadn't been forced into those restraints. If his chest wasn't sealed off, he wouldn't have even been able to sit down the way he was. Elisabeth strode over to the man. He looked up.

Before he could say anything, Elisabeth beat him to the punch.

"It's been a while, La Christoph—what, some two years since we last met in person?"

"Torture Princess Elisabeth Le Fanu—you said as much in your reports, but I'm glad to see you're in good health."

La Christoph gave a calm reply. He didn't sound like he was in pain, and the room's air was clear. It didn't smell of blood. Elisabeth nodded in satisfaction.

It appeared that La Christoph hadn't been subjected to torture or harsh questioning. Saints were resilient against pain, but even they had their limits. Plus, controlling their divine beasts took a heavy toll on their stamina.

Him being uninjured was a stroke of good fortune. Elisabeth gave him a light shrug.

"If anything, I should be saying the same to you. 'Tis gladdening to see you've not been injured. Fortunate, I suppose, that this lot has enough sense to realize that a hostage is only useful unharmed."

"Hmm… Are you…so certain about that?"

"What's wrong? 'Tis unlike you to be so inarticulate. Did they do something to you?"

"They may be our enemies, but even so, it goes against God's will to unnecessarily sully the name of another. Thus, I hereby give my testimony. They have committed no slights against me—but I will note they did ask me to be their friend."

"I *beg* your pardon?"

“It caught me somewhat by surprise. There’s a possibility that it was the preliminary step toward some form of mental attack, or perhaps brainwashing.”

La Christoph was the very image of earnestness as he gave his report. Elisabeth frowned.

Even before he was made a saint, La Christoph had voluntarily lived a life of pious devotion. There were likely few people he could call a friend, if any at all. And especially now that he was a saint, he could hardly be blamed for getting confused when an enemy asked for his friendship. However, the odds that his prediction was right and it was a prelude to some sort of attack were low.

At any rate, Elisabeth had never heard of a spell that required such a byzantine method.

Right as she was about to sink into thought, though, a cheery voice called out from behind her.

“All right, it’s finished! There’s no table or sweets, but I made cute chairs for our Mad Tea Party! Elisabeth, you can sit on this one, okay? Here, I’ll bring it over for you.”

With a “heave-ho, heave-ho,” Alice brought a cabriole-legged chair over and placed it beside La Christoph’s. However, the fact that they were in an empty room with nothing but a pair of chairs made it seem less like a tea party and more like a prison cell. Perhaps realizing what it looked like, Alice puffed up her cheeks. To even out the ambience, she scattered black miasma and flower petals facing them and made another set of chairs for herself and the man.

The three of them took their seats.

Both pairs faced each other as though drawn to some sort of invisible boundary line between them.

The Torture Princess and the saints’ representative having a sit-down with two world-class revolutionaries in a demi-human prayer room, eh.

It was almost absurd how fraught the scene was with inauspicious symbolism. Elisabeth was taken by an ominous premonition.

Across from her, the man in black spoke in the same level tone as always.

“As I’m the one who sought this discussion, I suppose I ought to start by introducing myself. My name is Lewis. No surname.”

"…Lewis, is it?"

"If you want more in the way of a self-introduction…then you might try searching your memories for a group of magic-item thieves who were apprehended in the Capital some ten-odd years ago. Although, I doubt there are much in the way of records. And if there were, I can't imagine anyone bothered keeping them around."

"I beg your pardon?"

Elisabeth let out yet another inane cry. After all, the man—Lewis—stood nothing to gain by willfully giving up information on himself. Yet again, his actions were utterly inscrutable.

"Now then, we're finally in a suitable location to hold a conversation. Once more, I have something I'd like to ask of you two."

Beside him, Alice gave a big nod. She noisily kicked her blood-soaked shoes about.

Lewis stopped her with a sidelong glance, then made his request as though he were calling on a pair of students.

"I want you to betray the world and butcher all who live in it."

*

Elisabeth came to an intuitive understanding.

'Tis another "simple equation," so to speak.

Vlad had said it himself, back when he was still alive. Those who had been taken from had a right to take from others in turn. They were, if nothing else, prepared to accept that they had that right. In order to carry out great acts with no regard for good or evil thereof, a certain *capability* was required. The capability to wear the tyrant's mantle as if it were a role one were meant to play.

Lewis's proposal was that of a man who'd been taken from.

Regardless of his reasons or circumstances, though, Elisabeth's answer was the same.

"Hard pass!"

"I have feelings, too, you know. I'm going to have to insist you at least hear me out before making your decision."

Elisabeth gave her answer just as immediately as she had in a similar situation long ago. However, Lewis merely brushed her rejection off.

It seemed he could be unexpectedly flexible. Elisabeth clicked her tongue, then crossed her legs up high.

Alice, eyes sparkling in awe, tried imitating her. After quickly admonishing her, Lewis went on.

"Besides, snap judgments are a rash thing to make. Go on, listen to your heart. After all, you, too, possess them."

"Possess what?"

"Repentance, dreams—

“—and hatred.

They were the same words he’d said before. Irritated, Elisabeth made to flatly deny his statement. Suddenly, though, she clamped her mouth shut. A vivid image had bubbled to the forefront of her mind.

The people she cared most about in the world, slumbering at the World’s End.

It was a beautiful sight—but nothing more. She could speak to them, but they wouldn’t respond. She could extend her hand to them, but her fingers would never reach.

A single, agonizing question was with her always.

Why am I the one out here, and you two the ones in there?

Kaito Sena wasn’t the Torture Princess. He wasn’t a saint. He wasn’t even the Mad King. He was just a boy. Yet now he was slumbering with his bride, bearing the burden of a world that by all rights he should have had nothing to do with.

Why did you two have to be sacrificed? If I wait, shall I ever see them again—and is there something more I could have done?

But no matter how many days and nights she spent agonizing about it, no answer came. And the more she thought, the more resentment began eating away at her.

Then Lewis put that anger into words for her.

“Too often does this world force a small few to bear the great burden of sacrifice.”

That was the true tale of repentance, dreams, and hatred.

Elisabeth stared at Lewis in silence. She realized something—he was trying to redo his failed recruitment attempt from before. Once again, he was presenting her with the same taboo question.

Once all was said and done in the battle for salvation—

—what had Elisabeth Le Fanu been left with?

And that question had another side to it, too.

Once all was said and done in the battle for salvation—

—what did Kaito Sena even obtain?

Had the choice the young man had made—

—with that infantile look in his eyes, really been the right one?

Or rather, was it truly acceptable for those who remained to unilaterally say, *Yes, it was the right choice*?

“Like Kaito Sena, Alice Carroll is from another world. And like him, she was subjected to senseless pain and cruelty. It’s as I told you before: Them being from another world is crucial. *I died, but I got a second chance at life. This time, I’m going to accomplish everything I set out to do.* That conception serves as an almighty justification. It gives them that magical quality that allows them to obtain limitless power. And how could it not?”

As Lewis spoke, Alice tapped her toes together in boredom and let out a yawn. It being La Christoph’s first time hearing the speech, he knit his brows ever so slightly. Lewis faced Elisabeth and continued:

"*Not even being allowed to live one's own life* is a cruel, pitiful fate, and one well deserving of such obsession. After all, a tragedy is a tragedy. But it doesn't have to end as one."

Nobody wants to just leave things like that.

The declaration was firm and earnest. Even though he was using the Fremd Torturchen as a weapon, his voice was strangely absent of any falsehoods or scorn. Elisabeth discourteously rested her chin on her palm.

"Go on then, say it."

"What would you have me say?"

"What cause have you to elicit our sympathies? What is this grand tragedy of yours?"

Elisabeth's tone was biting. She had known a great many tragedies in her time.

Kaito Sena's pain. Hina's devotion. Elisabeth's loss. She wasn't prepared to treat just any old misfortune as on par with those. Alice flinched at her sudden intensity.

She looked at Lewis nervously. Lewis, not shaken in the slightest, spoke in a dry voice.

"Very well. Then allow me to show you."

Allow me to show you my tragedy.

Suddenly, Lewis raised his black-clothed right arm. He moved his fingers.

A small shuffling noise sounded out. Lewis had removed his half mask, as one might take off a hat as a show of respect. The crow visage was gone, and the hidden section of his face was laid bare.

Elisabeth's eyes went wide.

In an instant, all her doubts had been cleared away.

There was no need for him to explain any further. Elisabeth immediately understood everything—what Lewis sought, what his motive was, and what he was talking about when he spoke of tragedy.

"You're…"

Lewis smiled.

There was no animosity in it.

However, his face was so hideous that it seemed to be from another plane of existence.

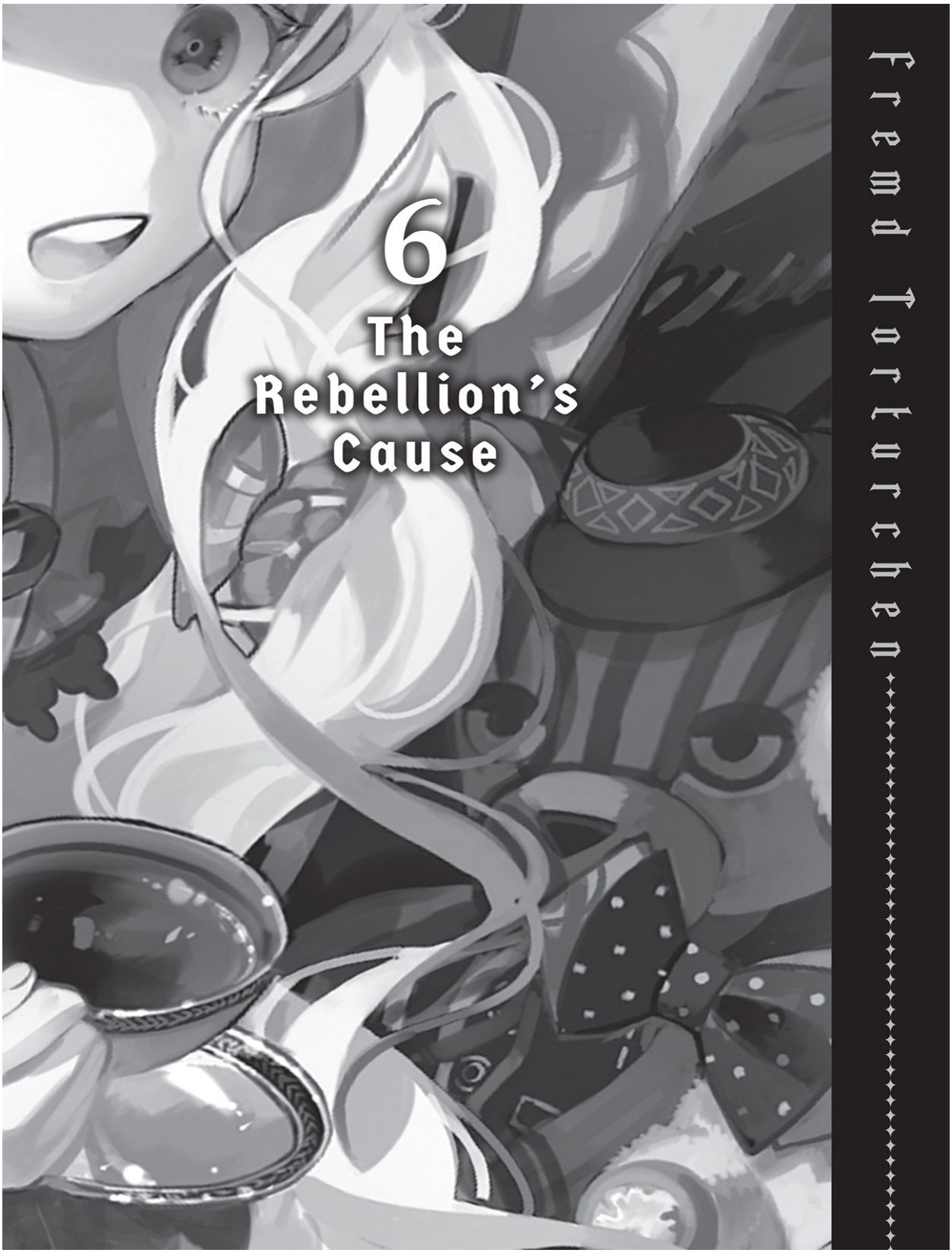
The left half of Lewis's face was human. But the right half was different. His eye was gold, its pupil was narrow, and his skin was covered in bluish-black scales. The section the mask had been covering had the features of a demi-human.

The two races' characteristic traits were laid out side by side, making for a mixture that was both highly peculiar and deeply unfortunate. Elisabeth Le Fanu quietly murmured the name of the tragedy she knew he was undoubtedly connected to.

"…The Mixed-Race Massacre."

It had happened in the background while the noble battle for salvation raged on.

And it was a tragedy grim enough to warrant revolutionizing the world.



6
The Rebellion's Cause

6
The Rebellion’s Cause

To tell you the truth, we began formulating the plan for our rebellion decades ago.

We’ll probably earn some criticism for that. After all, the massacre hadn’t happened yet. And at that point, I hadn’t even been born. But that only goes to show how long we mixed-race folk have been persecuted for. Each time the various races go to war, we inevitably get caught in the cross fire. And even in peacetime, too many of us get bled dry regardless.

Allow me to cite a personal example. My father was a demi-human, and my mother was a mixed-race beastfolk-human. Now, unlike me, my sister manifested the kind of beastfolk ears and tail that made her a target for deviants. When she was ten, a group of men assaulted her in an abandoned building. Afterward, she closed off her heart and went missing shortly into adulthood. As for my brother, he didn’t manifest any mixed-race characteristics at all. He went to work for the Church as an assistant, but when they discovered that we were related, the priest’s relative who was supposed to adopt him broke it off, and he hung himself out of grief. After that, I left my family as well. My childhood friend got sold off for a copper, and I haven’t seen them since, either.

Whenever anyone saw me, they would always scream the same thing. *“He’s possessed by a demon.”*

Now, it is true that demons induce grotesque transformations in their contractors. But the masses didn’t know that. However, vague impressions were more than enough for them to shun me. *“It’s like in fairy tales,” “hideous people do hideous things.”* No doubt that that’s how most people perceived me. I once offered my hand to a little girl who’d fallen over, and I got beaten half to death for my concern.

And so I roamed about, alone, planning on dying by the roadside somewhere. But a group planning a rebellion found me and took me in.

A few decades ago, a group of mixed-race folk whose appearances made it too difficult to participate in society banded together.

Now, back in the beginning, they were little more than a seedy group of bandits. But by the time I joined up, they’d acquired a number of successful commercial benefactors and were using their resources to steal and occasionally buy magic remedies and items, acquire golems and spirits, and amass rare materials and equipment. They’d even set up a little school of sorts for those with magical aptitude.

They dreamed of seceding from the world much as one might yearn for a lover. When I lamented the fact that my attack took three years to put into action, that long period of enduring was the primary culprit.

When the fourteen demons began their assault on mankind, our organization swallowed up information on them and used it to grow stronger. But right when we finally succeeded in summoning a low-ranked demon ourselves, I and the rest of the leadership declared we were ceasing our efforts.

We were afraid, you see. Most of the mixed-race folk lived in poverty, but they lived all the same. They had it hard, but no harder than the humans struggling to make ends meet in the slums. And we couldn't bear to put a mark on their heads as a result of our desire for rebellion. We didn't want to make our sinless brethren have to shoulder that grief. So we sealed away our dark magic and instead chose a path of endurance. We forgave countless small atrocities and left tragedies as they were.

And that was fine. We thought it was for the best.

But then the end of days came.

And after that, well, you know the rest. Thank you for lending me your ears. And I have one last request for you—please remember this. We were the ones who chose rebellion and swore revenge. But we were not the first to draw swords.

You people were.

*

"That is the reason I aim to revolutionize the world. The Mixed-Race Massacre, and the countless mundane sorrows that preceded it. Now, as for the former, I was planning on omitting an explanation, but would you prefer I went over it?"

"That shan't be necessary. I'm well acquainted with it."

Elisabeth gave her answer immediately. La Christoph was undoubtedly the same. And it wasn't just them, either. Basically every member of the intellectual class who survived the end of days knew about it. However, no one so much as mentioned it.

After all, it was a scandal serious enough to completely ruin the moving tale of the three races uniting in the face of oblivion.

The series of tragedies began back before the end of days, when the reconstruction sect spread a certain rumor.

"Hark, O ye ignorant faithful. Pray that God shall be your salvation. For the beginning, the middle, and the end all lie in the palm of His hand." "The end-time is nigh." "After the restoration, the devout faithful will be led into the new world." They were selfish delusions, and they weren't grounded in anything but bullshit. But when faced with the calamity that was the end of days, many people falsely believed that the predictions were coming true. However, only a scant few of them could truly claim to have been the

“devout faithful.” Afraid of dying, they turned to a crime not listed in their dogma.

Killing heretics.

That desire for salvation led to the Mixed-Race Massacre.

People hoped that by killing heathens, they could demonstrate their piety toward God.

Now technically, the beastfolk and the demi-humans’ objects of worship, the Three Kings of the Forest and the Sand Queen, respectively, were all God’s creations, so all their faiths shared the same foundations. However, even those mere aesthetic differences were enough for people to brand all other races as heretics. And because the mixed-race folk lived among them, they were the ones who became targeted. However, demi-humans were blood-purity fanatics, and because of all the chaos and mayhem, the beastfolk and other humans abandoned the mixed-race folk to their fate as well.

The mixed-race folk had no one to protect them and nowhere to run. Countless lives were lost to the senseless violence.

And to make matters worse, the incident left lasting marks.

At the time of the tragedy, most of the perpetrators had been completely deranged. Even still, there was no consensus on how harsh their punishments should be. And although officials often had their suspicions, it was rare to find a crime scene where it could be definitively proven that it wasn’t just the work of the demon underlings. Forget victims and perpetrators; it was difficult even pinning down how many crimes had actually been committed. Aside from the incidents where malicious agitation could be proven and the extreme outliers in terms of scale and brutality—like the case out in the sticks where dozens of people had been locked in a storehouse and burned alive—most of the perpetrators had been left at large.

And for another thing, the tragedies continued to happen even after the end of days was averted.

The stupid sheep are little more than base animals. They haven’t even the capacity to learn.

There was no shortage of fools who, still fearing God and Diablo, had begun committing ceremonial killings, forcing the three races to establish the Peace Brigade to crack down on them. Even that hadn’t stopped the violence, but over the past year, incidents had begun dropping precipitously. It was a happy trend, but the sudden dramatic change had left Elisabeth puzzled.

A short while ago, she’d mentioned as such to the crystal-bound Kaito and Hina.

“Ah, but there is some good news. Although they yet continue, the mixed-race murders have subsided dramatically over the last year. ’Tis a natural result of the situation calming down, but still. That said, there is something strange that’s caught my attention about the way it’s subsided.”

Now that I think of it…that may well have been our sole sign that this incident was coming.

Lewis and his compatriots had completely suspended their efforts right when they reached the stage where they could have put them into practical use. After the chaos of the end of days, it had taken them some time to get their operation back up and running. And while they were doing that, they were no doubt also rushing to protect the mixed-race folk.

A year ago, those efforts must have finally started bearing significant fruit.

While Elisabeth spun up conjectures, Lewis continued on.

"If you want to laugh at me, then laugh away. My words are but a lamentation of the humiliating lives we've been forced into. A cry of rage at the cruelty of the fates we've been subjected to—for so, so many insisted on continuing their insane foolishness. And who allowed them to be so stupid? So cruel?"

Why should we have to forgive them?

Make no mistake—we have been called on to forgive them time and again.

Lewis's sorrowful lament echoed throughout the white room. Elisabeth could tell that his yearning was true. In the past, he'd forgiven time and again. After "not even being allowed to live his own life," he'd tried to "let the tragedy end as a tragedy." But his resolve had been betrayed.

If there was an answer to his question, he no doubt wanted to hear it. However, no one spoke. Elisabeth simply thought.

Irrationality is irrational precisely because it cannot be explained.

Why had those tragedies happened? Probably not even the perpetrators could answer that question.

Elisabeth and La Christoph were both involved in overseeing the three races' affairs. However, neither of them had the base audacity to try to offer up excuses.

During her time with the Peace Brigade, Elisabeth had seen one of the massacres firsthand.

The crime had taken place in a demon worshipper's ceremonial chamber. The victims, all mixed-race children, had had their beastfolk ears torn off and the fur flayed from their skulls. And despite his head being reduced to little more than a lump of muscle fibers, one boy had even survived the process.

That…that was akin to butchering an animal.

"You're not the same as me. You're different from us.

We're completely different creatures.

That means I can do whatever I want to you."

That was the vile rationalization some people had come to.

No apology could be sufficient for that. Atonement was never an option.

And what's more, the scene Elisabeth had stumbled onto was from after the end of days was averted. The ones that took place during that panicked

time were crueler yet. Just reading the records of them had been enough to make several civil officials puke up their guts.

No answer could explain away irrationality on that scale. Instead, Elisabeth posed a question.

"I understand your motive full well. So what exactly do you intend to do?"

"A thought crossed my mind once—if the end of days truly had been upon us, maybe it would have all been fine. On the brink of annihilation, I could greet even their malice with a smile. All their atrocities could be forgiven, written off as isolated incidents of fear-induced derangement. But God and Diablo failed to bring down the hammer—"

—so I must do it in their stead.

The whisper slipped fluidly from Lewis's lips. He was laying his worn-out heart bare, but in a different way than he had when he'd expressed his sympathy for Elisabeth. For the first time, he was allowing his warped obsession to leak out.

"I'll take this world, I'll make it my own, and I'll kill every last fool who walks upon it. I don't need a reason. After all, justice died long ago. At this point, what use does anyone have for something so decent and proper?"

For those who've sustained such bitter wounds—may well just try to destroy everything.

The words Elisabeth had been contemplating earlier floated to the forefront of her mind.

Lewis had been left with his sympathy and his rage, but his passion and avarice had run dry. As he saw it, the world had no worth, and it was impossible to feel passion or avarice for something worthless. He'd decided to make the world his own, but not out of any sort of personal desire.

He merely wanted to *right a horrible wrong*. Nothing more.

Those who've been taken from have a right to take from others in turn, eh.

As far as Elisabeth was concerned, though—

—the whole thing seemed downright trivial.

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Writing him off like that was narrow-minded and cruel.

Elisabeth was well aware of how callous she was being. Yet even so, she couldn't help but think.

What exactly is a tragedy? An irrationality?

What exactly was rage? What did it mean to not have any sin? Who got to decide who had sin and who didn't?

Was ▪▪ guilty? Or innocent?

'Tis but one answer you can give with any certainty.

Namely, that thinking about it would get you nowhere.

It was true—the world did force a small few to bear the great burden of sacrifice far too often. If she was forced to say if that was forgivable or unforgivable, she would probably choose the latter. The day of forgiveness would never come. And the victims had every right to curse, resent, and detest the world. But on the other hand, there was something Lewis and Alice had forgotten. As such, Elisabeth merely gazed at them.

Upon finding herself on the receiving end of that ostensibly calm gaze, Alice frowned, then nodded.

"It's a shame, Elisabeth. It really is a shame. From looking at your eyes, I can tell I shouldn't expect the answer I want…but you know, I sort of knew that already. Saying to the Torture Princess *look at how pitiful we are—please lend us your strength* was never going to work, right? So you see, we prepared a reward for you. Now let's talk about it!"

"A reward, eh? I must say, I can't imagine anything you'll offer changing my mind."

"No, no, that's not true at all! I told you, remember? 'I'll help you meet them'!"

Elisabeth's eyebrow twitched. That was something Vlad had pointed out, too.

Diablo, the entity with domain over destruction, and God, the entity with domain over reconstruction, were sealed away within Kaito Sena's body. Depending on how he was handled, the world's fate would shift greatly. And Elisabeth had no intentions of letting anyone who planned on reaching for the two of them with blood-soaked hands live. Alice, perhaps sensing the hostility well up within her, shook her head.

"We're not going to do anything bad to the two people you care about, really! We just want to help you meet them!"

"Perhaps it would be better if I spoke on the particulars of the deal we're offering Elisabeth Le Fanu,"

Lewis cut in, as though he'd been waiting for the opportunity to do so. La Christoph remained silent. It was unclear whether or not he'd been offered any terms of his own. Elisabeth elected to stay quiet for the time being as well.

For the moment, her curiosity had won out over her anger. As long as God and Diablo remained in his body, Kaito Sena could never be freed. Or at least, that was supposed to be the case. And she didn't believe revolutionizing the world was possible, either.

I imagine Lewis's primary objective is to root out the rest of the Mixed-Race Massacre's perpetrators and see them punished.

After that, it was conceivable that he'd want power and control so as to prevent the same atrocity from ever happening again.

The fastest way to correct a foolish flock was to become a shepherd yourself.

The Fremd Torturchen, the Torture Princess, saints, and demon grandchildren were all valuable weapons with which to achieve that end.

They might even be strong enough to rewrite the world's power structure entirely. However, that was all. The road ended there.

There were three different races that lived in that world. Even if you kept one in check, the other two would invariably push back. They all lived in different places and fought in different ways, meaning their resistance would be deep-rooted. Maintaining control would be trying.

For a small group to truly maintain control, 'twould take unimaginable power to… No, hold on a moment.

All of a sudden, Elisabeth realized something. Their current situation bore a striking resemblance to a story she'd once heard.

It was a tale from long, long ago, of events that had happened in the world prior.

The Saint had told it, and Kaito Sena had recorded it. Then after she told it to him, the Saint vanished. In spite of the frenetic search conducted by paladins and associates of the Church, she still hadn't been found. However, Elisabeth didn't much care about that. The problem lay in how similar their situations were.

Before the last reconstruction, the world had descended into a morass of conflict and war. The Saint, wanting to quell the fighting on her own, went out in search of something. Specifically, a powerful deterrent—God and Diablo.

What was it that Lewis needed now that he stood in the same position the Saint once had? As if to answer that question, he spoke.

"I summoned a pair of weaker demons into a man and a woman, then destroyed both their egos. They had two children. Then I bred the children together. By repeating that process, it was possible to create a pure, powerful demon… I've already told you that story a number of times. What I want to teach you now is what lies beyond it. You see, over the course of my experiments, I was able to prove a new theory."

"An inauspicious prelude, to be sure… What was it that you found?"

"Demon grandchildren aren't restricted to breeding with dissolved contractors who couldn't control their demons. While you do need to use homunculus technology to grow artificial genitals for them, it's possible to make demon grandchildren breed with regular humans—and in doing so, we were able to create a new species."

"—!"

Elisabeth was at a complete loss for words. La Christoph's shoulders twitched.

The test subjects had likely been those who'd tried to murder mixed-race folk and had the tables turned on them. In a sense, it was just deserts. However, it was repulsive simply imagining the process it had taken to finally reach that result. Plus, what was even the point?

Lewis continued as dispassionately as if he were talking about crossbreeding mice.

“Demon grandchildren have human parts that are too damaged for them to form contracts with higher entities. However, if you cross a demon grandchild with someone capable of using magic, not only does it still inherit some of the demon blood, but you also obtain a new entity with a profound affinity for higher beings. The more powerful a mage the human mother is, the more human the baby becomes, and the easier it is for it to form a contract. My plan, going forward, is to prepare two babies, then transfer God and Diablo from Kaito Sena into them. Immediately thereafter, we can use God to prevent Diablo from going on a rampage. Then by sealing God in a crystal, we’ll be able to contain both of them in much the manner the Saint did.”

“Armchair theories, then. You’ve no actual proof that your plan will work. And even if it does, what then? The best you can do is contain them. The moment you awaken them, the end of days will commence all over again. That hardly makes for much of a military asset. What gain is there merely from changing their vessel?”

“We don’t have to use them. We just have to have them.”

Alice gave Elisabeth’s warning an apathetic response. Elisabeth turned her gaze over to her. Seeming to understand the plan despite her youth, Alice smiled gently.

“We’ll have the babies with God and Diablo in them. That fact’s the only thing that’s important. It doesn’t matter if we don’t use them—as long as everyone else knows that if we *do*, the world will end. That way, we can become proper shepherds.”

“I see—you aim to use them as deterrents.”

Elisabeth heaved a deep sigh. Their plan was the exact same as the Saint’s had been in the old world.

The similarities between their current situation and the one that had preceded the last world’s end of days were more than she’d imagined. However, there were also a number of key differences. For one, the greatest barrier—the summoning—had already been completed. Also, they knew a good deal more about contracts with higher entities than the last world ever had. Terrifying as the prospect was, their plan was much more likely to succeed than the Saint’s failed attempt to control Diablo had been.

Elisabeth’s headache worsened. She looked up at the ceiling.

But what exactly is a “proper shepherd”?

Was it someone who wouldn’t abandon even a single lost sheep? Or was it someone who was willing to cast a single sheep down a ravine to save a thousand others?

Or was it perhaps someone who was willing to take a hundred stupid sheep and chop all their heads off? There were too many ways to answer. If nothing else, it was foolishness for lower entities like them to try and find one with their limited reasoning skills and value systems. But if that was the case, then…

What exactly would proper salvation have looked like?

Even the conversation they were having right there at that moment had come about as a result of how the battle for “salvation” had concluded. The more she thought about it, the more she realized just how inane it all was. The Torture Princess fought through her headache and spoke:

“So…what part would you have me play in this horrid scheme of yours?”

“Hmm? Why, your role should have been clear from that explanation just now—you’re going to be the mother!”

Alice hopped up on top of her chair. Lewis buried his face in one hand. His carefully laid negotiation strategy had clearly just gone out the window. La Christoph blinked and cocked his head to the side. A few seconds later, after realizing what Alice meant, he turned to look at Elisabeth. It was a strangely amusing reaction. Elisabeth, distracted by watching La Christoph, took a little longer to catch her drift.

A moment later, though, the veins in her forehead practically bulged out of her skin.

“Let me make sure I’m understanding you clearly. You want me to copulate with a demon grandchild and have a baby?”

“That’s right! After all, you’re a woman, and your body’s adapted to the First Demon’s flesh! And you’re the world-renowned peerless sinner, the Torture Princess! And a pretty, mature lady! Why, you might well be the very best candidate for the mother in the whole wide world! So that’s our condition for you—and also your reward!”

“My reward? What part of that sounds like a reward to you? Do not sully my ears with drivel.”

“But, Elisabeth, don’t you see? All you have to do is have two babies, and you can free Kaito Sena!”

Through sheer obstinance, Elisabeth was able to keep her discomposure to a minimum. Alice didn’t seem to have any ill intent. Yet in a rare occurrence, her words struck Elisabeth like a spear to the heart nonetheless.

The thing was, there was a certain truth Elisabeth had long since known.

Skilled mages lived long lives, and the Torture Princess was certainly no exception. She had the capacity to vastly outlive any normal person. However, she’d also done the math. The odds were close to zero that, in her lifetime, she would ever meet a vessel powerful enough to serve as Kaito’s replacement and become a contractor to God and Diablo. And even in the unlikely event one *was* born, it wasn’t like she could just force them to take over the role.

In other words, the answer was clear: No matter how long she waited, it wouldn’t matter.

“I wish I could see you,” she’d said, dreaming of that someday. But on the other hand, she’d already reached her conclusion. That idyllic dream wasn’t going to come true. And once she’d acknowledged that, all that remained was the cold, hard truth.

There shan’t be a “someday.”

Elisabeth Le Fanu would never see her dim-witted servant again.

Elisabeth recalled a certain sight—a sight that was beautiful, but nothing more.

Her two dearest people, slumbering amid azure and crimson flower petals. The crystal was cold and hard. The distance its clear walls separated was slim, yet it was farther than the World's End. She couldn't touch them. She couldn't talk to them.

Just once is all I ask. If I could reach them, I wouldn't mind chopping off my fingers. If I could talk to them, I would happily stitch my lips together. If I could hear their voices, I would light my ears ablaze and then crush them with glee.

But there was no one she could pay that toll to. The Torture Princess spoke calmly to the weak self in her heart.

"You knew, didn't you?" "Aye, I knew indeed."

Their reunion would never come. Yet just now, Alice had put a crack in that hopeless conclusion of hers. It was like she was whispering to her.

Your hands can reach through that crystal, she said, tempting her.

All she had to do was sacrifice herself and choose to drench the world in blood.

"It's okay, Elisabeth; I know. In their heart of hearts, everyone has just one thing that truly matters to them."

And for its sake, they could do or become anything, right?

Alice Carroll deepened her smile, as though to demonstrate her understanding.

It was a pure expression, filled with nothing but concern toward Elisabeth.

*

"…Ah, I see."

Elisabeth quietly closed her eyes. She was holding one leg, which was perched atop the chair. Still posed like that, she leaned all the way backward and rested her back against the chair's. Her elegant black hair rustled as it draped around her. She pursed her lips tight.

Then she went still, as though considering the demonic proposition.

Silence filled the room. Nobody said a word.

Even Alice closed her chatterbox of a mouth. And not just Lewis, but La Christoph, too, was wordless.

A few moments later, with no warning whatsoever, Elisabeth snapped her eyes open. Her red irises gleamed as she sat back up. Then she looked straight forward. Without asking anyone's opinion, and without exchanging so much as a glance with La Christoph, she gave her answer.

Sure enough, her answer was the same as it had been in a similar situation once before, down to the very word choice.

"Hard pass!"

“That was surprisingly quick.”

“And decisive.”

“Yeah, I figured that wouldn’t work.”

Surprisingly, the reactions she got were all fairly nonchalant. It would seem everyone had more or less seen it coming.

Elisabeth snorted with a feline “hmph.” Her anguish was still there, but she showed no hesitation.

After all, it was the only answer she could have ever given.

The avengers’ motives and actions were reasonable. And their temptation was certainly appealing. But she had her pride, and she wasn’t about to abandon it. If that had been an option, she’d have smashed the crystal ages ago. After all, Elisabeth knew.

Kaito Sena was a fool. An utter, incorrigible fool.

Even though he’d known just how disgraceful, reprehensible, selfish, and cruel people were, he’d forgiven them anyway. Even after concluding they were hideous, he’d still called them precious. And he’d chosen to love and protect them.

That alone meant the world was worth defending.

The things cherished by the people you care about are beautiful.

Even if you bear no love for those things yourself, that fact still remains.

Kaito Sena saved the world. His unconditional love had saved everything. Thus, to destroy it all would naturally be an action founded on the opposite emotion. And it then followed that those saved by love had no choice but to prevent that destruction.

It was a strange, comical equation. But *it wouldn’t be beautiful any other way*.

Anything else would have been a disservice to that boy’s resolve and to the way he’d lived his life.

And besides, Lewis and his allies had forgotten something.

“You’re not the same as me. You’re different from us.

We’re completely different creatures.

That means I can do whatever I want to you.”

That was how Lewis now perceived the targets of his vengeance, too.

It was true—the world did force a small few to bear the great burden of sacrifice far too often. If she was forced to say if that was forgivable or unforgivable, she would probably choose the latter. The day of forgiveness would never come. And the victims had every right to curse, resent, and detest the world.

However—that was all.

There was no reason the persecuted should have free rein to persecute anyone and everyone.

“I see no reason why those who’ve been taken from should be able to take from others as they please.”

Elisabeth made her assertion loud and clear. Alice's white ribbons swelled up. A fiendish smile carved its way across her young face. However, Elisabeth merely ignored her and went on.

"'Tis only reasonable you seek revenge. Your resolve shan't waver, I can see that much. But if you aim to resent, kill, and seize control indiscriminately, act not surprised when your audience bares its fangs at you. For in the end, both are the perpetrator, and both are the victim. Those who kill are killed, and the cycle of revenge only ceases when the side killed relents and willingly presents their own neck. You and yours faced tragedies. 'Tis only reasonable for you to curse the world—*but do not pretend your reasoning is just*."

Elisabeth fixed her gaze on the two of them, the hideous mixed-race man and the girl killed in another world. Both of them were innocent victims. Words could hardly begin to describe the depths of the wounds their hearts had sustained. And they had no way to make their perpetrators pay. It was only natural they would wish for destruction. However, they had no right to turn that wish on the world.

No one did.

Lewis was right—justice had perished long ago. But if that was the case, then using the fact that he'd been taken from as justification was completely contradictory.

Those who resented the world could never be loved by it.

Kaito Sena knew that. Even when faced with the opportunity to kill his father, he'd turned it down, saying, *"I don't need him."* And after that, he'd continued suffering in pain time and again. But he'd never tried to make anyone else shoulder his agony.

I love you, so I'll shoulder it myself, he'd said.

Why, he'd even smiled while saying it.

"You people are vile."

Elisabeth spat out the epithet from the bottom of her heart. She acknowledged their feelings, but as a person, she held them in contempt. It didn't matter if they had taken or were taken from, if they were sinful or sinless.

"'Tis base to proclaim yourself weak for the purpose of trampling on others."

The room fell into silence once more. Alice moved to hop down from her chair, but Lewis reached out and grabbed her arm. He was waiting for Elisabeth to finish speaking. The Torture Princess laughed wickedly.

"And one more thing. Who the hell do you think it is you've invited? 'Tis hardly an exaggeration to call your choice of guest fatally misguided—for I am the Torture Princess, Elisabeth Le Fanu. I am the peerless sinner, hated and resented by all. I am the proud wolf and the lowly sow. Having lived the proud and haughty life of a wolf, I shall die like a lowly sow—and yes, true, I acknowledge it all."

Elisabeth raised her head in a dignified manner. She thought back on what Vlad had said. He was right—it was hardly fitting for the Torture Princess to grieve like that. And so she laughed again, a heinous, inhuman laugh.

"I have had everything taken from me. At the end of my long battle as the Torture Princess, I was left with nothing. *But what of it?* Do not mistake me, Lewis. Your sympathy is misplaced—for I was always on the side that took. I slew countless innocents, and by all rights, I shan't have so much as a demon by my side when I die. But what of it?"

Throughout Elisabeth Le Fanu's life, she was accompanied by a single dim-witted servant.

She would never see him again. She couldn't talk to him. She couldn't even hear his voice. And yet even so—

"There existed a calm, banal, dreamlike moment. That moment has passed—but so be it."

Even though it was over—

—a part of it lived on.

"'Twas his wish that the world be saved and that I live on. As his master, I aim to honor that decision. Those days were a miracle and a blessing the likes of which were too good for this sinner, and they shan't return. But so be it."

Every dream eventually ended. But what was so bad about that?

That was no reason to err. It was true—she could give birth to those vile children, drown the world in blood, and allow vengeance to flourish. But it wasn't the ending the boy had wished for. And because she knew that, it was her duty to protect his story, even if doing so was more painful than death. She had to make sure it reached its proper conclusion.

She couldn't allow anything to defile Kaito Sena's story.

Even should that choice prove wrong.

Something beautiful and radiant existed.

That fact was certain and was true to that day.

Even rent from beauty itself, its fruits were worth protecting.

"I thank you, Alice Carroll. 'Tis true, I was hardly acting like myself, and I've now seen the error of my ways. So allow me to say this loudly and with pride: There was meaning indeed in this peerless sinner's solitary survival, if only but to quash that resentment of yours—for to lop off the heads of those who've chosen evil is evil's task in turn."

Elisabeth sneered unpleasantly. She leaped from her chair and thrust her arm out into the air. Darkness and flower petals wound magnificently around her. From within, she drew her trusty scarlet blade.

"Executioner's Sword of Frankenthal!"

The Torture Princess's voice boomed loud as she stood with her executioner's blade in hand.

This time, Alice hopped down from her chair for real. Lewis didn't move a hair. The faintest of smiles played on La Christoph's lips. Alice's hair bobbed up and down as she prepared to launch into an angry tirade.

Before she could, though, Elisabeth raised a finger in front of her face.

"And one more thing—no matter what answer I gave, your time was up regardless."

"Now listen here, Elisabeth, you… Hmm, wait, what do you mean?"

Alice blinked. Lewis raised an eyebrow. However, seeming to have realized something, he immediately shifted his gaze to a section of the wall. Elisabeth nodded. His instincts were sharp.

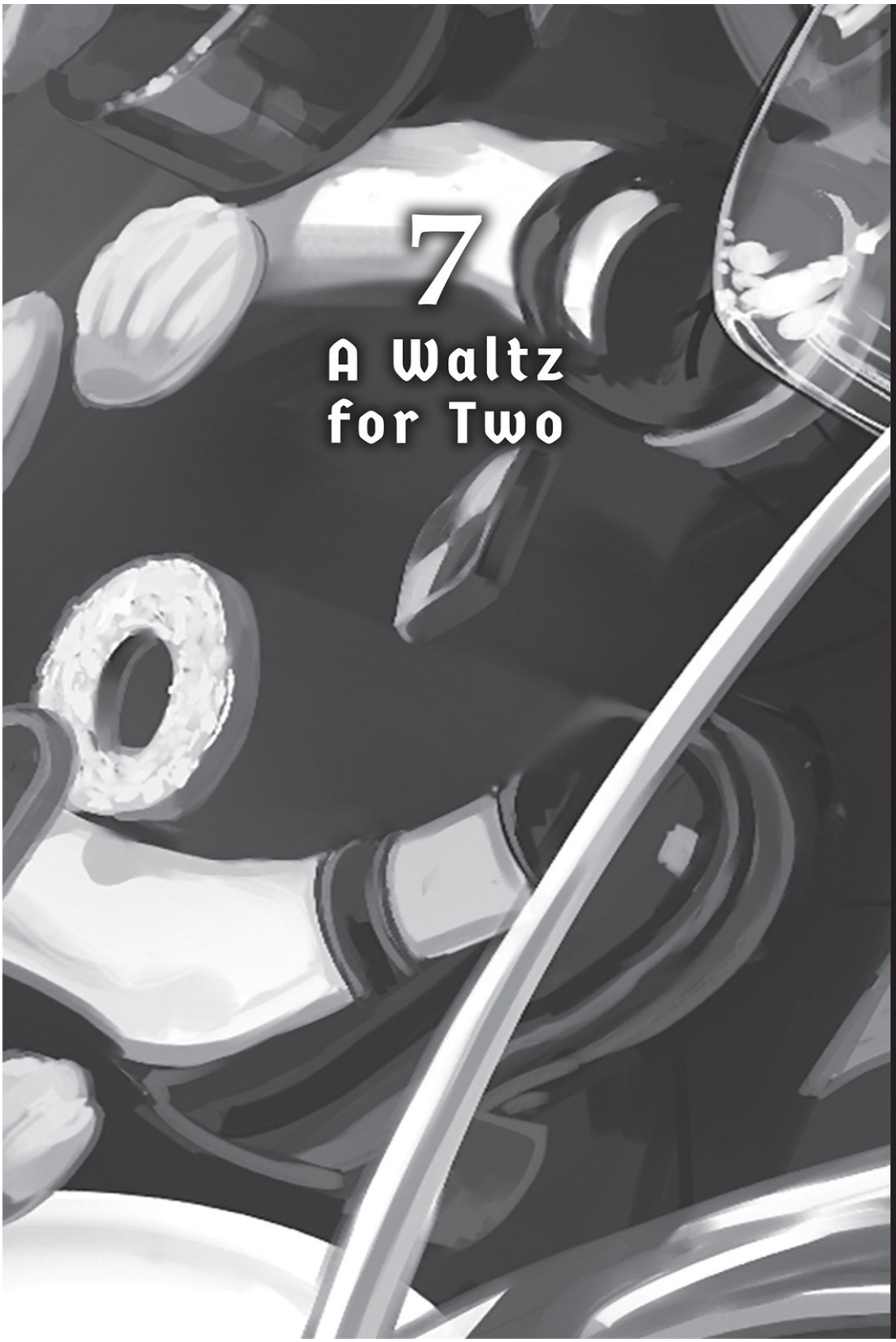
The next moment, a heavy, muffled *BRRRRRRRRRRRRN* echoed through the air. The entire villa shook.

Chips and splinters rained down from the ceiling. Something was clearly happening. Lewis quickly rose to his feet, and Alice clutched his coat's hem in fear. However, the room had no windows. There was no way for them to see what was going on outside. Despite that, the noise and the tremor had definitely both come from the direction Lewis was looking.

It was the direction the Sand Temple lay in.

Elisabeth knew that meant all hell had just broken loose.

For that sound was none other than *the Sand Queen's corpse exploding*.



7
A Waltz for Two

✦✦✦✦ Alice Carroll's Diary

The skies are clear, and it's neither hot nor cool.
As far as the progress on our plan goes...it feels like
we've finally escaped from the Pool of Tears, I suppose.

"Your golem powers will translate words for you, but you should practice writing them, too," Father told me!

He said it should be a piece of cake for me.

And because looking through the pictures of the diary Kaito Sena and his friends wrote was such great fun, I decided to write one myself. In fact, I even know how to use a quill pen.

I'm a good girl, you see, so I can do pretty much anything.

Today, I was very happy.

And I'm sure I'll be very happy tomorrow, too.

If I write that, will Father tell me I don't have to force myself, I wonder? It's true, though. Really, it is! My body doesn't hurt one bit, and my belly's always full. Plus, Father was ever so kind today. And none of the others ever call me a bad girl. Nobody beats me or hits me or breaks my teeth or pulls out my fingernails. Why, that's more happiness than I could possibly dream of!

If I could be just a little bit greedy, though, a friend would be nice. You know, like Dinah, from Alice in Wonderland. It would be nice if I could have someone to treasure like that.

So you see, I'm really looking forward to meeting her.

Will she like me, I wonder?

Will she understand my pain, like she understood Kaito Sena's?

Ah, I'm sure it'll be fine. After all, we're the same. So I'm sure that, just like how she became friends with Kaito Sena, she'll take a liking to me, too. Oh, I hope I can meet her soon.

Today's menu . . . . . Bread and stew. Because I'm a good girl, they gave me a serving with lots of meat.

Father's reaction . . . . . Even though Father is of mixed race, all he ever eats are herbs.

Today's Father . . . . . Hmm, his face looks a little pale today.

Today's Father 2 . . . . . I got worried, but he says he's fine.

Now then, that's all for today's entry.

Oh, what great fun this is going to be, Elisabeth Le Fanu!

Together, we'll carry out all sorts of delightful acts of revenge against the world!

7
A Waltz for Two

Right before Elisabeth left for the demi-human lands, another act unfurled in the human Capital.

The stage was the royal tomb's lowest floor, in front of the chamber with the kings' coffins. The cast had two members. And the play was about the attack on the demi-human lands, as the ebony Torture Princess so rhythmically told the golden Torture Princess.

"Listen well, Jeanne. I intend to head for the demi-human lands, exactly as demanded. But in the meantime…I want you lot to make a move elsewhere. While Alice and Lewis, the attackers' main force, are focused on negotiating, your job is to free the hostages."

"How very simple. In fact, it hardly even rises to the level of a plan. That shit's basic! It's so damn bland that it makes unbuttered bread look like caviar!"

"Aye, so it is. And that's why you're going to add a little twist."

Elisabeth gave Jeanne a meaningful grin. Her voice, filled with sinister intimations, piqued Jeanne's attention.

Then without a shred of hesitation, shame, or indecision, Elisabeth gave Jeanne her instructions.

To put it in chess terms, her plan was as insane as sacrificing one's king.

"Namely, you're going to blow up the Sand Queen's corpse."

"*Reckless*…doesn't even begin to describe it. This isn't a risky play; it's straight-up illegal. But this shit ain't half-bad. It's so wicked, and *so wicked*! Guess this is why they pay her the big bucks!"

Jeanne licked her lips like a cat.

Her honey-blond hair fluttered, practically scraping the Sand Temple's ceiling as it did. The temple had a large, metal, hoop-shaped lighting fixture with brazier cages installed on its circumference, and at the moment, Jeanne was perched atop it.

Each time the walls shook, the chain-mounted hoop trembled violently, the towering bone pillar before her eyes creaked, and rock chunks of various sizes cascaded down from the ceiling. Despite the jagged rain, though, Jeanne didn't so much as flinch. Her gaze was focused on a single point.

Deep inside the temple, there was a hexagonal sanctuary adorned with gold and jewels. It was a building inside the building, like a pair of nesting boxes. Without going through its door, it was impossible to have an

audience with the Sand Queen's corpse. The layout served two purposes; it enhanced the temple's mystique, and it protected against mages invading it.

The inner sanctuary was guarded by a magic circle that repelled people based on their blood.

Historically, the spell had covered the entire temple. However, the rest of it had been lifted after the third peace treaty, both because of how inconvenient it was when their old friends the beastfolk wanted to send their royalty to pay respects, and out of consideration for the burden it placed on the demi-human priests when they made pilgrimages to the other sectors.

As a result, mages with enough power could forcibly teleport their way in from outside. But during times of peace, the temple was open to the public anyway. There was virtually no reason anyone would need to sneak in.

However, the inner sanctuary was still inviolable, even to that day. If you opened its door, though, you'd be greeted by a winding, serpentine staircase covered in blood runes. Beyond it lay the Sand Queen's burial chamber, a massive room blanketed in a thick layer of vitreous sand. Her colossal body, half buried under the white, cloudy grains, was said to resemble a lizard's. It was also said her body glowed red and had never decomposed. For many ages, she'd rested down there in peace.

Now, though, that stillness had been shattered into a million pieces. An explosion had gone off beneath the sanctuary.

"...Oh my, that is dramatic. And probably more effective than stabbin' them in their actual hearts, too. Almost feels too easy."

Jeanne murmured the words, which sounded as though they'd have been best accompanied by a whistle, as dispassionately as ever.

The explosion had had an immediate, drastic effect inside the temple. Until just a moment ago, the hostages' arms had been bound, and they'd all been collapsed lifelessly on their sides. The terror from the end of days had returned, overwhelming them and leaving them unable to even move. Now, though, it was like a switch had been flipped. All of them rushed violently toward the inner sanctuary.

The armed mixed-race folk stood dumbfounded. They couldn't even parse their hostages' sudden change. However, the demi-humans' actions were consistent with their beliefs. Even in crisis situations, their desire to be "proper subjects" took absolute precedence. To them, their reverence for pure bloodlines and the Sand Queen was more important than their own safety. And right now, that meant checking in on their queen's corpse to make sure it was unharmed.

One of them nimbly hopped up and took off at a dash. Several of the others tripped and fell, but they, too, continued struggling onward.

A long moment later, the mixed-race folk shouted out threats to make them stop and come back.

"Don't get up without permission! You wanna die?!"

“Silence! We had a deal, and you broke it! How dare you lowlifes endanger Her Majesty the Sand Queen!”

They were met with one angry cry after another. The mixed-race folk flinched. They had no comebacks to that.

After their armed assault succeeded, the mixed-race people had used the Sand Queen’s corpse as a hostage for their own hostages.

Blowing it up for no reason would make keeping control of the temple impossible. It might even mess up the negotiations with La Christoph. But given that an explosion had broken out regardless, the only possibility they could think of was that their lookout had acted on his own—in other words, they thought it was their own fault.

Their response weakened, and for a moment, the mixed-race folk stopped in their tracks.

“So far, all according to plan.”

Jeanne nodded. However, the mixed-race people soon set off to check on the state of affairs underground, and earlier than she’d expected. They tightened their grips on their weapons. They needed to check what was happening in the inner sanctuary, and the hostages grouped at its entrance were in their way. Jeanne narrowed her eyes. But then it happened.

Someone pounded hard on the temple’s main doors from outside.

Flustered, the mixed-race folk turned around. Jeanne nodded again. It would seem they’d made it in time.

Angry voices were audible through the door. The purebloods who’d avoided confinement had come running over. It was an immediate, violent, impulsive response. “Did you harm the Sand Queen?!” they shouted.

The graveyard-like silence that had filled the first sector had been completely broken.

Fear was only capable of controlling people for so long, and that time had come to an abrupt end.

The mixed-race people looked dumbfounded. However, their surprise didn’t last long. Soon, their faces were filled with loathing.

Their people had long been oppressed and persecuted, making the spirit of self-sacrifice that accompanied blood-purity fanaticism anathema to them.

They turned their weapons back toward the royalty and other hostages.

*I imagine they think the people outside have merely forgotten the position they’re in due to their rage, but hearing the hostages scream will shut them up. I see, I see. A very practical solution…**or so they thought! Suckers!***

Suddenly, a scream rang out.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!”

“…Huh?”

However, the mixed-race people hadn’t done anything yet. They looked toward the inner sanctuary’s entrance in unison.

The scream had come through it, from below. Clearly, their lookout in the Sand Queen's chamber had been visited by an uninvited guest. That meant that the bombing, too, had been this stranger's work, and not their lookout's.

However, teleporting in directly was impossible. When had someone been able to sneak past them? Why had they gone after the Sand Queen instead of them? And what possible reason could they have for wanting to blow up a corpse?

The mixed-race folk found themselves with questions upon questions. But the angry cries from the hostages and people outside prevented them from thinking straight. Jeanne licked her lips as she gazed down at the chaos below her.

"I suppose it's time, then. When the meat starts sizzlin', you gotta take it off the grill."

Jeanne took a deep breath. Then she elegantly arched her back and thrust her bondage-strapped chest forward. Her ribs pressed faint outlines into her skin, and her honey-blond hair draped luxuriously down her back. Her long eyelashes fluttered as she spoke her loving whisper.

"Now then, my fair lady—let us dance."

Jeanne raised her arms into the air like a conductor.

The moment she did, something shot out into the room full of bone pillars.

Her silver puppet.

*

The golden Torture Princess, Jeanne de Rais, once possessed an exceptional weapon.

It was a titan made from four parts. One of them was a beast made of nothing but fangs. Another was an automaton, shaped like a human except for its fatally warped framework. One of the other monsters was a lizard with limbs made from pipes and wings made of glass. And the final one was a bipedal suit of armor with no visible seams on its body. The weapon was singular, and the weapon was many. It was one, and it was four. They were separate, and they were a titan.

Such was the nature of Deus Ex Machina.

Not only could it be summoned regardless of the user's nature or disposition, but it was also a living weapon without equal. However, Deus Ex Machina was lost to Jeanne. She had sacrificed it to save her first love, Izabella Vicker.

It happened right before the end of days.

After being captured by the Church's reconstruction sect, Izabella was forced to eat demon flesh and partially transformed into a monster. Saving her was just barely possible, but it would require removing the corrupted

parts and replacing them with Deus Ex Machina. And thus, Jeanne was faced with a choice.

She had the power to save Izabella. However, doing so would mean taking a weapon meant to deliver salvation and rendering it useless. The question was, was the life of her first love more important than the world? And the answer was clear.

Even children know that some things were more important than others. And Jeanne had been created to deliver salvation. It would be a sick joke for the self-proclaimed "oppressor of slaves, the savior of the world, the saint, and the whore" to prioritize her own love over it. And knowing all that, Jeanne chose Izabella anyway. The worst choice possible.

The end of days loomed on the horizon, yet she abandoned her greatest weapon. However, Jeanne had no regrets.

Saving the world and destroying it were both but mere matters of personal conceit. And if faced with the decision a thousand times, Jeanne would no doubt make the same choice a thousand times over. Even if they knew it was a *fatal error*, there were sometimes choices that people simply had to make.

For Jeanne, that moment was one such choice. And that was all there was to it.

Now, though, all that was but a distant memory. Over three years had passed since the end of days was averted.

If she'd gone that long without taking steps to remedy her own degraded strength, it would have made her a failure as a mage.

After the world was saved, Jeanne had accepted Izabella's invitation to join the royal castle's retinue. Then as Jeanne carried out her duties there, she also tried searching for a new weapon. With the end of days averted, she'd fulfilled her purpose in life and had no more reason to fight, but now that she'd fallen in love, she wanted to get her power back anyway.

At first, she used her acquaintances' techniques as references and tried methods such as summoning countless blades and calling forth torture devices. However, nothing she tried spoke to her the way Deus Ex Machina had. However, she'd largely expected as much. Deus Ex Machina was a supremely dangerous entity, as it drained its user's mana whether they wanted it to or not. In order to adapt to controlling it, Jeanne had trained ceaselessly since childhood. Eventually, she became more adept at using that steel titan than at using a fork and knife. Trying to find something to replace it was like chopping off her arm and looking for something else to align her nerve endings with. Nothing could possibly compare to the steel titan she'd sacrificed.

But right when Jeanne was getting ready to accept her own limitations, Izabella casually made a suggestion.

"Now that I think about it, couldn't you just use me?"

She'd dropped that particular bomb while they were having tea, of all times. When she'd made the proposal, Jeanne's mouth had been full of biscuit.

And that was how the silver puppet began dancing.

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"Good heavens… I suppose I'm not one to talk, given that I called myself 'the oppressor of slaves, the savior of the world, the saint, and the whore,' but **why do all the women in my life have so many loose screws?**"

Jeanne let out an exasperated murmur. As she did, she continued waving her arms about in fluid, passionate motions.

Down below, where her rose eyes fell, a silver light traced a graceful arc.

In accordance with Jeanne's commands, the woman was weaving her way in between the hostages. Her mechanized legs kicked at the rebels' arms from below, then followed up with strikes to their chests. One after another, their assorted weapons went flying through the air.

The woman's blows came straight yet were curved. Normal people couldn't even begin to follow them. The mixed-race folk toppled over, powerless to resist. The next moment, though, a sharp noise rang out, and a bullet grazed her.

"—Gunfire?"

Jeanne cocked her head a little to the side. When she looked over, she saw a half-beastfolk youth reloading his gun with powder and a bullet. The demi-humans' metalworking was unparalleled. After mastering cannons, they'd begun developing guns, but there were still a lot of kinks to be worked out before the weapons could enter mass production. At the moment, the only ones that could be found in the wild were the few prototypes owned by members of the ruling class who'd taken an interest in them. The rebels had probably pillaged it from one of the hostages' houses.

"Wh-what the…? You're not human, you're not mixed-race… What the hell are you?!"

All the fur around the young man's face was bristling up. He fired a second time. However, the woman swatted the bullet away without sparing it a second glance. Then she closed in on the youth and sank her knee into his gut.

Vomit sprayed from his mouth as he crumpled to the ground. Mixed-race folk and hostages alike balked at the sight.

The way she was moving was beyond the capacity of any living creature.

Technically, it isn't just her movements. That ain't the half of what my lady's capable of.

As Jeanne observed the panic below, her thoughts turned.

At the moment, the woman was combining her own sight with Jeanne's overhead view—which she was sending directly to her—and Jeanne's orders

to make the optimal choice at every turn. It was a feat that qualified squarely as superhuman.

She carried out Jeanne's absurd demands one after another, never once pausing or stopping.

The way she ran, like a skater gliding on ice, was spellbinding. It felt almost as though it should have been accompanied by music.

Suddenly, there was a change in the inner sanctuary. Several small holes appeared in its gold- and jewel-adorned walls.

Several metal spheres had just cut themselves out from inside. As they spun, they extended their legs. Once spread out, their full bodies looked like spiders. However, not all of them had eight limbs. Some of them even had an odd number of legs.

They quickly began scuttling across the ground. They chased after the woman, then leaped toward her. Once they were in midair, they spun about again, changing once more into all sorts of different shapes. With *clicks*, they slotted themselves into the woman's chest and rear.

Each one of them was a "lifeless living creature" made from a part of Deus Ex Machina. Once they returned to the woman's body, they became mere "parts" again and went silent. It looked like all of them had made it back up from underground successfully.

After making sure they were all safe and accounted for, Jeanne nodded. Then she quietly summed up the situation.

"As evidenced by my presence here, teleporting into the temple was trivial. The hard part was what came afterward… If we weren't careful, the hostages would have been in danger. And most importantly, the rebels had a lookout stationed with the Sand Queen, so there was a risk that the hostages themselves would interfere with any rescue attempts out of fear that the rebels would harm their queen. **But still, takin' the biggest obstacle and blowin' the damn thing up ourselves? That was one crazy-ass solution.**"

Jeanne shrugged in exasperation. Meanwhile, the woman continued her elegant dance.

Jeanne took a moment to think back on how they'd gotten there.

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Their work had started around when Elisabeth left for the demi-human lands in accordance with the man in black's demand.

At the same time, Jeanne and the woman had secretly teleported into the temple where the Sand Queen's body was enshrined.

Once they arrived, Jeanne hid near the ceiling, and the woman took cover behind a pillar. Then the woman broke off as much of Deus Ex Machina as she could without endangering her life and sent the pieces to invade the inner sanctuary by burrowing holes in its walls.

As part of their threat, the mixed-race folk had made it known that they'd set up gunpowder around the Sand Queen. By having the machines strike their legs together, Jeanne and the woman had started a fire and set off an explosion. They'd followed Elisabeth's plan to a T. However, that wasn't to say they didn't run into problems.

In fact, they ran into nothing *but* problems.

Blowing up the Sand Queen's corpse wasn't just racially insensitive. It was essentially a declaration of war. When the woman first heard Elisabeth's plan, she'd cited that fact as part of her vehement objection.

However, Elisabeth had merely replied with an indominable laugh.

"—Aye, so it would be. If we truly destroyed it, that is. And if we were caught."

In other words, they'd be in the clear as long as the corpse didn't actually get damaged and as long as no one found out who was responsible. The plan was reckless, but given the situation they were in, it also had a certain logic to it. All they had to do was line everything up nicely and cover their tracks, and there wouldn't be any problems.

Even so, the woman's fears persisted. However, Elisabeth just grinned and went on.

"—Worry not. Actually destroying the Sand Queen would require a blast strong enough to level the entire inner sanctuary."

Elisabeth had evidence to back her claim up, too.

There were two pieces of information she was basing it off—"the Sand Queen's shrine had been built from the bones of her close relatives," and "some of the pillars had mineralized into gems." Normally, that kind of change would be impossible.

Synthetically mineralizing bones into gems required one to apply high heat and pressure to them in a special mage's furnace. It was hard to imagine having that happen naturally to bones that were part of a building. In short, it was reasonable to assume that the change had been caused by something about the materials—the bones of the Queen's relatives. And it followed that there was a good chance that the same thing had happened to the Queen herself, possibly to an even more dramatic degree. In the short time before she had to depart, Elisabeth had gone around and made the civil officials dig up every record and piece of information they could find related to the Sand Queen. However, the demi-humans had kept a tight lid on information regarding her corpse.

The search seemed futile. Surprisingly enough, though, they were able to find consistent accounts in old songs and legends.

"A body unheld by death's fell claim." "A radiant form." "A glittering frame."

"Adorned with reddened scales." "Like beautiful stones." "Our eternal protector."

All those phrases implied that the Sand Queen's corpse both glowed red and hadn't decomposed. It seemed entirely likely that her scales had grown

over her flesh and bones and transmuted her corpse into gems. And given that those same gems were being used to support their most sacred shrine, they were probably highly sturdy. The tales of how the Sand Queen's scales had protected her in battle while she was still alive supported the theory as well. In following, Elisabeth concluded that a random handful of explosives wouldn't be enough to damage it. However, that didn't change the fact that the hostages were being cowed into submission out of fear that the Sand Queen's corpse would be harmed.

For the devout, the mere prospect of having an idol attacked was often scary. Humanity was no different in that regard. For example, the Saint statues were nothing more than lumps of bronze, but if you took a whip to one, the faithful would still raise their voices in protest.

The mixed-race folk were taking the demi-humans' simple, base piety and using it against them. Elisabeth wanted to take advantage of that fact.

As long as Jeanne and Izabella were able to get out, all that'd be left behind would be the Sand Queen's undamaged corpse. Everything would get tied up neatly. The explosion would get written off as the fault of the mixed-race folk, or perhaps just a pile of built-up ash spontaneously combusting or something.

As Vlad had once put it, there were times when victory demanded one to abandon their scruples.

It was fitting, then, that such a battle plan would come from his own beloved daughter.

"I'm sure that aspect was unintentional on the little lady's part, mind you. She might be adopted, but those two are more alike than… **Ah, shit, I got distracted. Eh, not that my lady really needs the help.**"

Jeanne blinked. Below her, the dance was reaching its conclusion.

Most of the mixed-race folk were already on the ground. However, the last one—a man with bits and features from all three races—was mounting a desperate resistance. After miraculously repelling the woman's slash, he made a break for it. Then he reached out a scale- and fur-covered hand and hoisted a nearby demi-human girl up by her bound arms.

The girl screamed. Her blue scales were adorned with fine silks, meaning she was probably a member of some noble's household.

The man pressed a dagger against her thin neck.

"D-don't come any closer! Stay back, or the girl gets it!"

I recognize you had to come up with it on the spur of the moment, but ***holy shit, could you have picked a bigger cliché?***

Jeanne thought about it for a moment. There were so many mixed-race people in the temple that efficiency couldn't possibly have been their foes' primary goal. From that, she inferred they didn't have anyone on-site nearly as strong as the solo attacker who'd gone after the Capital and ultimately committed suicide. They probably wanted to give their younger members field experience by having them watch over unresisting hostages. That was

more or less what she'd expected. All it would take was a single order, and the woman could end things right there.

Now then, what to do? I think…

However, Jeanne intentionally decided to take action herself. She stepped forward, leaving the metal hoop and striding into empty space as casually as if she were going for an afternoon stroll.

Her honey-blond hair gently fluttered as her pale body pitched forward.

Then Jeanne fell, much in the way she had once before.

She aimed for the man's head.

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This wasn't how things were supposed to go.

Those were words shared by everyone who'd ever had a perfectly conceived plan fall to pieces before their eyes.

It was true of humans, beastfolk, demi-humans, and mixed-race folk alike. It was a natural reaction. And it only made matters worse when the one who ruined that plan was a monster who'd appeared out of nowhere. Having one's assumption of superiority suddenly overturned would throw anyone into a panic. With a little sense, though, one could pull themself together, then try and come up with a new plan to salvage the situation.

Trying to flee would be folly. There was no help to be found that way. No matter how far away you got, the result would be the same.

However, that of all things was the option the man went with. He gradually began making his way backward.

It would seem his plan was to escape out the temple's door. Things had gone silent after the screams and gunfire, but the angry residents were still right outside. The man was so preoccupied with the threat before him that this unfortunate fact had completely slipped his mind. But all of a sudden, he stopped in his tracks. He was the last mixed-race person standing, so it stood to reason that his instincts were sharp. He looked up.

There, he saw a golden girl swooping down on him like a hawk. Jeanne murmured:

"So long now—it's time for good little boys to go beddy-bye."

She twisted her body in such a way that it hardly seemed possible and skimmed his jaw with the tip of her foot.

His brain shook, causing him to immediately pass out. If she'd wanted to, it would have been trivial for Jeanne to snap his neck. However, she elected to spare his life. The recoil from her kick caused her to decelerate a bit. She used the opportunity to check the demi-human girl's condition. She looked terrified, so Jeanne tried giving her a little smile.

Then she approached the ground. The moment before she was dashed against it, though, a silver flash shot toward her like a shooting star.

A hand reached out and caught Jeanne.

The scene of the knight catching the golden princess in her arms played out exactly as it had once before.

It was like an image straight out of a fairy tale.

The woman squeezed Jeanne tight. After breathing a sigh of relief, she softly buried her nose in Jeanne's honey-blond hair. For some reason, seeing them like that made the demi-human girl blush and hop high into the air.

As she did, the woman—Izabella Vicker—raised her face from Jeanne's and shouted:

"What in the world possessed you to leap out like that?! I thought my heart was going to stop!"

"Oh my, my lady, you were worried you would fail to catch me? C'mon, girl, give yourself some credit! A top-tier babe like you ain't gonna screw up like that!"

Jeanne gave her a spirited response. She was clearly taking great joy in being embraced by Izabella.

After all, Izabella could have handled the situation just fine on her own. Yet even knowing that, Jeanne had leaped down anyway. And it had all been leading up to that moment.

Put bluntly, Jeanne loved being embraced by Izabella.

Izabella glanced over her to make sure she wasn't hurt. After breathing another sigh of relief, she cleared her throat.

“Ahem… It’s certainly true that I had no intention of letting you fall. But that doesn’t mean I can’t be worried about you. And so I ask you yet again… Can you please try not to be so reckless?”

“Yeeeees, ma’aaaaam. **Aye-aye, Captain.**”

“That…doesn’t sound quite as sincere as I’d like.”

Izabella pursed her lips in irritation. Jeanne chuckled. It was a far cry from her normal, automaton-like behavior. It was clear that she wasn’t repentant in the slightest. Izabella furrowed her brow.

Jeanne, pleased as could be, began thinking.

Ah, I see, how intriguing. ***Huh, so this is what it feels like to have someone worry about ya! This shit ain’t half-bad!*** *…Although, I do hope you’ll forgive me, my lady. After all, if not for what I did, you’d never let me cling on to you like this, would you?*

Jeanne had confessed her feelings to Izabella. However, the two of them weren’t actually dating.

This, too, was an old story by now.

After the end of days was averted, Izabella had come to Jeanne with a question.

“I wanted to check with you personally. Is it true that you have romantic feelings for me?”

“I won’t mince words—yes, it’s true. That’s why I went and swapped out your body for machine bits. I wanted to save you, no matter the cost.”

“Is it also true that I’m your first love?”

“Yes.”

“…I see. I’ve acknowledged your feelings, and I appreciate them.”

And that was the last Izabella mentioned of it.

Jeanne had never gotten a satisfying response to her confession.

Izabella did get Jeanne hired as a royal mage and made sure they stayed together. But that was all.

Jeanne couldn’t understand what Izabella was thinking. Not only did Jeanne portray a relatively atypical brand of femininity, but she had trouble understanding the subtleties of normal human emotions altogether. As such, Izabella’s actions—or lack thereof—had left her at a total loss. However, the culprit herself didn’t seem to realize the effect she was having on her. It was utterly vexing. At the same time, Jeanne had no intention of forcing an answer out of her. Just getting to be by her side was enough.

For someone with hands as bloodstained as Jeanne’s, it was more than she could have asked for.

Still, she did find herself longing to be embraced from time to time.

It was a sweet craving, one that she herself didn’t fully understand.

Jeanne, taking full advantage of her current opportunity, nuzzled up close to Izabella. Seeing how unrepentant she was, Izabella opened her mouth to scold her. Before she could, though, Jeanne sealed up her lips with

the tip of her finger. Izabella blinked and went silent. As the gears in her cheek spun, Jeanne reached toward her tenderly.

"And what about you, my lady? Are you all right? I asked quite a lot of you back there. Even with magical reinforcement, it must have put a lot of strain on your flesh-and-blood parts. **Ain't this the bit where a normal person's supposed to start hackin' up blood?**"

"I appreciate the concern, but I've trained more than most. There's no need to worry. I am a commander, after all!"

Izabella clenched her fist. It was true; she didn't seem even a little exhausted. However, Jeanne began touching her all over to make sure nothing was out of place. Izabella pursed her lips again.

Her movements from before had transcended the limits of flesh, and Jeanne was concerned about the burden it had put on her body.

The dance-like fighting style was something the two of them had worked on together. During Ragnarok, Izabella figured out how to make her machine parts move. And afterward, Jeanne had given her a hand and helped perfect the technique.

By running mana through the Deus Ex Machina parts that made up Izabella's body, Jeanne was able to control her like a puppet. It really was no exaggeration to say that Izabella Vicker herself was Jeanne's new weapon.

While Jeanne was "using" her, Izabella's physical prowess and ability to process information both drastically increased. And just like the real Deus Ex Machina, she was able to receive Jeanne's orders without Jeanne having to say a word. Once she mixed in her own judgment, she was able to act on her own volition while still fighting as instructed.

It was like she was moving her legs while following her partner's lead.

It was like they were dancing as a pair.

That was why they called their technique *Waltz*.

As Jeanne and Izabella had their exchange, the demi-human girl continued gawking at them. Perhaps she'd been hypnotized by their beauty, as it appeared they'd awakened something in her. When the other hostages saw the girl's lively figure, they seemed to realize that the danger to their lives had passed. They glanced hesitantly at one another.

Then they all made a rush for the inner sanctuary.

Jeanne's tone was flat; it was clear how exasperated she was.

"They don't seem to learn, nor do they seem to give up. **I guess this is that 'conviction' shit at work, huh?**"

"They've been through a lot. If they still have that much energy, we should probably count it as a blessing."

"How very sentimental. The way I see it, they're all just a bunch of dumbfucks, but…so be it, I suppose."

This time, the hostages were successful in getting the sanctuary door open. As she watched them all rush underground, Jeanne rested her back against Izabella. A troubled look crossed Izabella's face, as she probably

wanted to go untie the rest of the bound young girls. Jeanne pretended not to notice. As she fawned on Izabella, she let out a small whisper.

“We finished your absurd request. In a moment, we’ll begin moving the hostages and second-class residents somewhere safe. You’re on your own now, Elisabeth Le Fanu. **Dunno how things are goin’ over there, but if you’re gonna bite it, you’d better make damn sure you get us that intel first.**”

The golden Torture Princess made an insolent proclamation.

And far away, over in the demi-human king’s villa, the ebony Torture Princess nodded.

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“Aye, very well. I should think that goes without saying. I’ll make do somehow or other.”

The communication only went one way, but Elisabeth murmured back regardless. Then she gave her fingers a sharp snap.

The thin blood membrane floating in front of her eye popped, and the image of the inside of the temple shattered into pieces. A red droplet landed on Elisabeth’s cheek like a tear.

Alice twitched in surprise. Lewis was as silent as ever.

Elisabeth wiped it away with the back of her hand as she squared off imposingly against the two of them. She sliced at the air with Executioner’s Sword of Frankenthal. Her free left hand was wreathed in darkness and flower petals.

Sensing her fighting spirit, Alice stepped forward to match her.

La Christoph nodded briefly. Between the rumbling from the temple and Elisabeth’s murmur, he’d sensed that the situation with the hostages had been resolved. Wanting to get ready for battle himself, he made to release his chains.

That was when Elisabeth grabbed him by the collar.

“Up we go!”

“Pardon?”

She ran mana through her petal-covered hand, then lifted La Christoph’s entire body up. Executioner’s Sword of Frankenthal abruptly vanished, and she let out a firm shout.

“Now we flee!”

“Huh?”

La Christoph stared vacantly at her. A moment later, though, he went, “Ah” with comprehension. It had taken him a second to process what was happening to him. Instead of offering him an explanation, Elisabeth merely took off at a dash. However, La Christoph was simply too tall for her to lift properly. His hair and hem dragged sadly behind him as she ran. After loudly kicking the door open, she made her way outside.

The door swung shut with a surprisingly quiet *thump*.

All that remained was a deafening silence.

“Hmm?” Alice tilted her head to the side. Then a few seconds later, she burst.

“Wha… Wha… Wh-WHAT THE HEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEECK?!”

Alice bounded to her feet. The white ribbons on her hat stood straight up. She hopped up and down in a violent rage, flailing her fists as she shouted.

“Wh-who just runs away like that without fighting?! Who *does* that?! You can’t just say whatever you like and then flee! That’s mean! Mean, mean, mean, mean, mean! We have to go after them at once, Father! Faster than if we were chasing the White Rabbit!”

“No, there’s no need to rush.”

Lewis murmured flatly. Alice tilted her head in confusion again.

Lewis took the mask still resting in his hand and leisurely raised it up to his face. A small *click* rang out. Then after covering half his features with the white crow mask, he murmured once more.

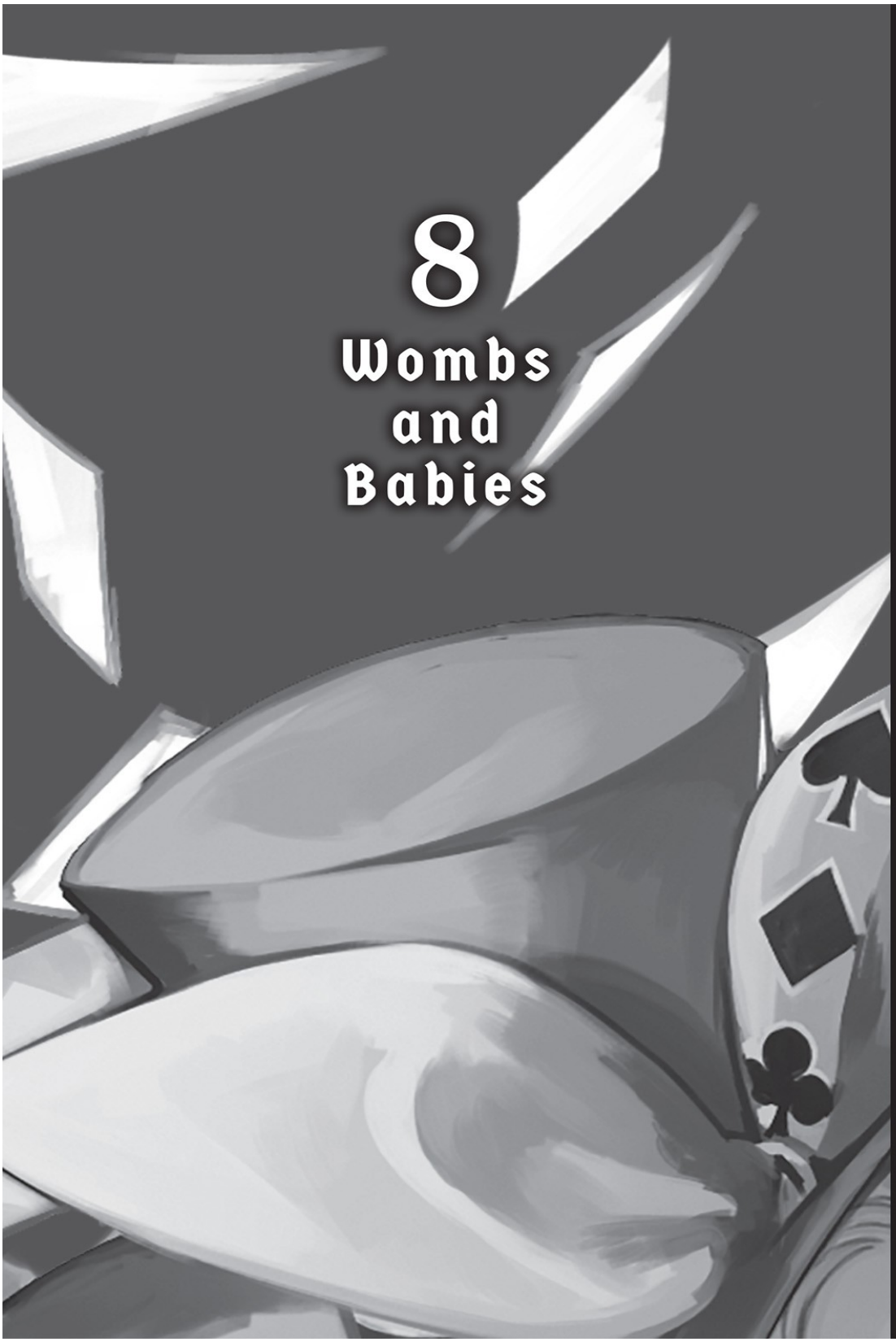
“They can run all they like. They can flee wherever their hearts desire. And there, they can learn that the world is over. No…”

…It had been over from the very beginning.

As Lewis made his cold statement, a faint smile came over his lips.

It was a tired, self-deprecating expression—

—and by far the one most dripping in malice he’d shown yet.



8
Womb and Babies

8
Wombs and Babies

Now then, let's talk about compensation. For what, you ask? Why, it's simple.

I'm talking about your reward for betraying everything and helping to destroy the world.

Unfortunately, I haven't the faintest idea of what I can offer you. You saints have had much taken from you, but it's unclear if there's any method to change you back. And people haven't exactly been diligent in searching for one. After all, why think too hard about the world's enigmatic phenomena when you can simply write them all off as miracles? But hasn't the thought ever crossed your mind?

The being who stole your flesh, warped your bones, and corroded your minds…

…is it really God?

Could your prayers not have coincidentally resonated with a different higher entity, one we lower creatures can't even perceive? Of course, this is nothing but an armchair theory. Little more than a cynical guess. But it's impossible to refute, isn't it? After all, nobody knows the exact specifics of the mechanism by which people become saints.

Yet even so, you still believe. You say all mankind is capable of is prayer, and so it is our duty to pray.

May salvation find us all, you say. Blessings unto all. For comporting yourself nobly, helping the weak, and thinking of God is faith manifest.

How dubious.

How foolish.

The end of days gave us our proof—God is nothing more than a phenomenon. The Saint hated everything, and she sowed the seeds of evil. There was no noble Creator receiving your prayers. Just some alien *thing* that gave and took as it pleased.

Why, that almost sounds like the contracts demons make, doesn't it?

No, forgive me. That was hardly the way one should talk to a friend. Allow me to get back on topic. The things you've lost can never be reclaimed. Even so…or rather, because of that, is there anything you desire in their place?

We intend to deliver punishment. To take the world and make it our own. And to kill every last fool who lives in it.

But regardless of whether we're successful or not, the end result will be the same. No one will be saved.

Eventually, all this will end. Is there something you want to obtain before that happens?

Surely, there must be at least one— There…is? There is, you say?!

Ah, my apologies. Even though I'm the one who asked the question, your answer still caught me by surprise. Please, I must know. As long as it's within my power, I'll get it for you. So go on, La Christoph, O Modest Birdkeeper, O devout faithful wrenched from humanity.

What is it you desire?

…Ah, hold that thought. I hear Alice's voice. The Torture Princess must have finally arrived.

I'll hear you out in a moment. But please don't change your mind. I simply must know.

That wish you might have had fulfilled—

—if only God were more merciful.

*

Elisabeth's footsteps echoed loudly as she dashed down the hallway.

The passage's walls were built out of stone, and there were no windows anywhere. However, the metal lizards and flowers mounted on ornamental pillars did a decent job of breaking up the otherwise-stifling gloom.

Fortunately, there were no sliced-up corpses or viscera to be seen. Apparently, the tragedy hadn't reached the villa's center.

Even so, though, Elisabeth's expression was fierce and grim. Also, a strange *thumpthumpthumpthumpthumpthumpthump* noise was echoing in her wake. She was still dragging La Christoph along the ground.

She was holding him by the collar and carrying him diagonally behind her.

Although he was still largely upright, La Christoph had cleverly elected to go limp. The image of his resigned form was like that of a corpse ripped from its coffin, or perhaps that of a cat that'd grown used to its owner's tyrannical abuse. However, seeming to have suddenly remembered he was still alive, La Christoph spoke.

"Might I have a moment, Elisabeth Le Fanu?"

"Hmm? While we're in the middle of fleeing? If it's about the ruckus in the temple, I'll explain later."

"That's quite all right. Once I realized that Izabella and Jeanne de Rais were acting separately from you, I got a fairly clear picture of the situation. At the moment, I have something else I'd like to discuss. Might I ask that you mind my hair a little more? It's getting torn to shreds."

"Hmm?"

Elisabeth came to an abrupt stop. She turned and looked back.

It was true. After getting tangled around his shoes and robe, La Christoph's hair had met a terrible fate. There was a lot of it, so the damage

wasn’t immediately obvious, but there were a number of large tufts scattered about on the floor behind them.

After surveying the grim spectacle, Elisabeth went silent. She lowered La Christoph a little and spoke.

“Well, I am sorry about that, but was this truly pressing enough to warrant stopping me over?”

“Not at all, and I myself don’t particularly mind. Even if all my hair was torn from my head, as long as my scalp remained, I would consider it a victory. It was simply a bit of sophistry to get you to stop running. My actual question is about where we’re going.”

“Even I would feel guilty over leaving you bald, but… Wait, why not simply ask that, then?!”

“I judged that the hair comment would be likelier to get you to stop.”

“What kind of absurd judgment is that?!”

Elisabeth shook La Christoph from side to side. He cocked his head. He wasn’t mocking her; it was merely an automatic reaction. He then went on as though nothing had happened, his tone as serious as ever.

“Allow me to repeat myself. It would seem you memorized the building’s blueprints ahead of time, and we do appear to be making our way outside. However, it looks like we’re taking a fairly roundabout route. Am I correct in assuming you made that choice when you noticed the irregularity?”

“…If you know that much already, what meaning is there in asking it aloud?”

“The decision I made to stop you was founded on sheer arrogance. But I ask you again, Elisabeth Le Fanu—as the Torture Princess, do you truly believe it’s something we ought to witness *now*?”

The look on La Christoph’s face was earnest. Elisabeth thought for a moment. Saints had peculiar dispositions. No matter what was waiting for them at their destination, La Christoph would probably be fine.

In other words, he was worried about the emotional blow it would deal to *her*. It felt as though she was being made light of. However, she refrained from voicing her complaints. Instead, she merely checked to see if anyone was chasing them.

There wasn’t a soul behind them for quite some distance. Alice didn’t appear to be following them. But given the situation, that fact seemed highly unnatural.

La Christoph’s unwarranted concern is hardly unreasonable. Alice and Lewis show no signs of pursuing us…which means odds are high they’re allowing us to roam free on purpose.

Go. Follow. Run. Witness. And burn the image into your eyes.

Abandon every last shred of hope—that was the sentence their foes seemed to be levying on them.

Yet still, leaving the situation as is and fleeing will cause no small number of problems in the future.

Elisabeth was all too aware that once sowed, seeds of evil quickly took root and bloomed into massive flowers. The moment you noticed them, you had to eliminate them as quickly as possible.

She gave a small nod, then set off in the same direction as before.

La Christoph stopped talking out of respect for her decision, staying silent even when his black hair started getting mangled again. His expression was the spitting image of an old dog putting up with a young girl's mischief.

At the moment, the two of them were heading outside. At the same time, though, she was also heading for a certain location, one that was on their way—probably. However, the details were fuzzy, and she had no exact notion of its location.

At the end of the day, all she was doing was following a worrisome smell.

She'd noticed it after they left the prayer room, and it seemed La Christoph had become aware of its irregularity at about the same time. They were heading in the opposite direction of the corpse-strewn entrance, yet the farther they went, the thicker the air grew. Fleeing without dealing with it was an unsettling proposition, but the moment they saw its source, there was a chance they'd be overcome with despair.

As she ran, Elisabeth's mind turned.

In order to revolutionize the world, Lewis said he and his group created innumerable demon grandchildren.

In all likelihood, that foul air was related to their taboo experiments.

The vivid smell had two parts to it: the reek of blood and the fragrance of something that only mages who'd used it themselves when brewing medicine would likely recognize. An ingredient that was, in a sense, maternal in nature.

It was something that had no right to be wafting through the air.

Amniotic fluid.

*

"'Twould seem we're here."

Click.

Elisabeth's heels clicked one final time as she came to a stop.

A set of double doors with metal adornments stood before her.

A short while ago, the two of them had arrived at a hall reserved for the king and guests of honor. Instead of using its main entrance, though, they'd slipped through the passageway on its right. The farther they went, the more ostentatious the decorations got.

Now they'd reached an area with hundreds of lizards carved on its walls and ceiling. Each one of the overlapping reliefs had glimmering jewels for eyes, and all the lizards, large and small, were heading deeper inside, eventually gathering around the double door and forming a decorative frame around it.

Other than their handles, the doors' entire surfaces were covered in silverwork scales.

As Elisabeth ran her hand over their rippled exterior, she referenced her mental map of the villa.

Beyond here lies the banquet hall.

The banquet hall was used for all sorts of things—balls, feasts, concubines putting on performances to entertain guests of honor, succession ceremonies, and more. And even when there wasn't an event going on, it still should have been a lively space. Now, though, it seemed dark and gloomy. But that was to be expected.

After all, the smell of blood and amniotic fluid was coming from beyond those doors.

La Christoph freed himself from Elisabeth's grasp and hopped down. His arms still bound in chains, he deftly turned toward the doors. The low whisper that left his mouth was clearly a warning.

"Elisabeth Le Fanu."

"Aye, I know full well."

As she stood by his side, Elisabeth looked down. A large pool was spreading on the floor beneath their feet.

The liquid was leaking out from under the doors. Demi-humans rarely used carpets on account of all the sand, so the red mixed in with the liquid was clearly visible.

Also, they could hear laughter from beyond the doors.

It resembled the sound of children whining and crying.

'Tis hard to imagine any children being here, though.

Elisabeth glared at the doors. Other than the butchered corpses, they'd yet to find a single demi-human on the premises. The concubines and king's children were a given, but even the servants all had extremely pure blood, so everyone inside had been captured and taken to the temple. Lewis and his group had probably decided to use the empty building as a temporary base. And when they did, they'd brought something with them.

But what?

The grim premonition grew stronger and stronger. A sudden conviction welled up in Elisabeth.

These doors would be best left unopened.

The barrier between this side of the door and the other side was concealing a sight that must not be seen. However, she couldn't simply ignore it. Averting your eyes from an ugly truth did nothing to change its veracity.

Eventually, it would catch up with you all the same. And when it did, it would pierce you through the back.

The sole potential problem was…

As I am now, how much will the contents of the other side affect me?

It was a worry that the old Elisabeth would never have felt. If someone else had mentioned it to her, she'd have snorted at them. After all, she was

the Torture Princess. She'd borne witness to innumerable tragedies. She hadn't just seen the First Demon; she'd had her body bound to its pillar's core.

By all rights, she was on the side that *created* hells. Why, Elisabeth had once drowned an entire town in pain and despair, basking in its people's hateful cries like they were cheers of admiration.

Loathsome Elisabeth, repulsive Elisabeth, cruel, hideous Elisabeth!

A curse upon you, a curse upon you, a curse, a curse, an eternal curse upon you, Elisabeth!

What was there that could still surprise her? But boasting she could take it all in, no matter what it might be, would be base carelessness. She was a different person than she'd been before the end of days. Every assumption and preconception she'd had had been violently overturned. It was difficult to predict what kinds of things would shock her now.

Of all the things left in this world…

Could she really witness any of them and feel no despair?

Not even she could say with any certainty.

Yet despite that, the Torture Princess reached out and slowly pushed the doors open.

Then she saw them.

With her own two eyes.

The white wombs—

—strewed about the room.

*

They were smooth—

—the wombs—

like freshly peeled eggs.

The wombs were round and horribly bloated. Stretched taut, they were smooth and sleek. They were clearly nothing more than sacks of flesh. However, they were more than just sacks. Each one had a little navel resting on its peak, and they were just barely covered in living skin. In other words, they were people, though they'd expanded in ways no living person's body should grow. Some of the wombs were female. Some were male. But they were all just flesh.

They were sacks of flesh.

Yet they were wombs.

"I…see."

After confirming what was on the other side of the door, Elisabeth let out a succinct murmur.

The scene laid out before her was a good deal more graphic and repulsive than she'd expected. That wasn't to say it was overly nightmarish, though. It was simply a different kind of tragedy than the ones demons were partial to.

That was her rough appraisal of the situation. As a matter of fact, Elisabeth had seen something like this before. The specifics had varied greatly, but the impression she'd gotten was one and the same.

Some time ago, there'd been a case she'd been tasked with cracking. The victims, all mixed-race children, had had their beastfolk ears torn off and the fur flayed from their skulls. And despite his head being reduced to little more than a lump of muscle fibers, one boy had even survived the process.

Compared with what demons did, this was child's play. But it was still so monstrous that it was hard to imagine a person having carried it out.

'Twas much the same as this.

"You're not the same as me. You're different from us.

We're completely different creatures.

That means I can do whatever I want to you."

Without that vile rationalization some people had come to, no person could create a spectacle that grisly.

Elisabeth glanced over the banquet hall again. The inside was completely empty. The room was set up to be easy to rearrange on account of the various events that took place there, but now even the bare minimum of furniture it was normally adorned with had been removed.

All that existed there were the wombs.

Or rather, all that "lived" there were the people.

Adult women, adult men, old women, old men, young women, and young men were *rolling* about the hall.

However, it was arguable as to whether or not it even made sense to still call them people. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to call them "round, bloated wombs with human limbs and heads attached to them."

That was how thoroughly the victims had been transfigured.

The wombs were blown up like eggs, far past the point a human body should have been able to distend.

All of them were naked, and their genitals were in plain view. Compared with the wombs' expansion, though, that seemed hardly worth mentioning. Their thighs were stained with excrement and amniotic fluid. Although these poor creatures clearly weren't being cared for, their undersized feet all had numbers carved into them, like the branding marks you'd see on cuts of meat being stored in warehouses. They looked like ID numbers. They might not have been receiving care, but they were clearly being monitored, at the very least.

For how the scene was, it seemed almost industrial. Every action that had been taken leading up to that point had been utterly amoral.

True, though. 'Tis surely convenient to be able to leave them lying about like that. Makes them easy to transport, too.

Elisabeth took a second to think about how they'd been brought there. She nodded dispassionately.

As she did, she also ruminated on Lewis's words.

“I summoned a pair of weaker demons into a man and a woman, then destroyed both their egos. They had two children. Then I bred the children together…” That all falls under the purview of those whose human forms have collapsed and degraded. But then…

…What about the subsequent steps? Demon grandchildren were able to breed with humans. Lewis had said so himself.

The things rolling about on the ground must have been the fruits of that research. Based on what Alice had said, women were better suited to the task. If you weren’t concerned with quality, though, people of any age or sex could serve as “mothers.” After all, the demon grandchildren that served as “fathers” were barely human to begin with. Their version of copulation probably took cues from their human instincts, but the act itself was closer to a magic ritual. In short, whether or not the other party had genitals was of little concern. That said, there seemed to be some variation in the victims’ swelling, irrespective of their sex. It was revolting, but at the same time, *highly intriguing*. Elisabeth thought some more.

Lewis wanted me to breed with demon grandchildren and have two babies. In short, he judged that the first birth wouldn’t be life-threatening.

Even though the conception method looked more than deadly.

But Alice hadn’t seemed like she was lying, either. She really did plan on reuniting Elisabeth with Kaito Sena. Between her and Lewis’s reactions, a reasonable assumption would be that powerful mages didn’t go through the physical deformations. And the correlation between the victims’ swelling and the amount of mana they had supported that thesis.

’Twould seem the babies consume their host’s mana as nutrients.

However, that gave rise to a new question. Why did the “mothers” who didn’t have enough mana swell up? But the answer to that was simple. When the babies couldn’t get their nutrients from mana, they hastened their growth so they could use something else instead.

After growing until they had teeth, they feasted on their mothers’ flesh and organs.

And that was no mere theory; it was being proven by the moment. The sound of chewing was audibly coming from inside the wombs. As the sloppy noises grew louder, the mothers began silently flailing their limbs about. They couldn’t even open their mouths to scream. However, the laughing, crying voices continued.

The voices weren’t coming from the mothers.

They were coming from the unborn babies.

The fetuses knew nothing of their mothers’ wills.

Yet they danced all the same.

*

At that point, Elisabeth stopped pondering and closed her eyes. Amid the darkness, she quickly sorted through the many things she'd seen and heard on her journey to reach those double doors.

The mixed-race folk tried once to pardon their long history of oppression. But then the end of days came, and in the mayhem, the slaughters took place—tragedies senseless enough to make civil officials vomit. And after that, they continued. A boy had the flesh flayed from his head while he yet lived, and similar events were a frequent occurrence.

If any of those things hadn't happened, the scene before her probably wouldn't have come to be. But they all had.

Time marched mercilessly forward, leaving mistakes perpetually unatoned for in its wake. As a result, the mixed-race folk chose to cast off their role as innocent victims. Proclaiming oneself weak in order to oppress others was unforgivable. Yet even if they knew they wouldn't be forgiven, they would no doubt continue down their path.

That was what it meant to be an avenger. The world's unrelenting malice and apathy had forged them into that.

Those who take are taken from in turn.

Ultimately, the mixed-race folk were even stripped of their humanity. That was simply the way things were.

That was the sad, sad way things were.

Elisabeth's silky black hair swayed as she turned to the side and looked up at La Christoph.

"What do you intend to do?" she silently asked him. His response was a dignified nod.

Then he solemnly spread his bound arms wide.

A metallic, alien *clank* echoed out as the thick chains fell to the floor. Bloody amniotic fluid splashed around them.

La Christoph had cast off his restraints. His crossed arms were parted, and his chest was laid bare.

Most saints had undergone changes to their bodies and minds that would normally be impossible, and La Christoph was no exception. All the flesh surrounding his ribs had been shorn away, and he had no lungs or internal organs to speak of. Instead, his ribs were filled with little birds, which were made out of light and resembled skylarks. They were sacred beasts. Overuse of his powers during Ragnarok had left his ribs stuck open, but now they were healed and serving their purpose as a cage once more.

He was the Birdkeeper, and he was a "living birdcage."

That was La Christoph's nature.

And when the Modest Birdkeeper undid his chains, it could only mean one thing.

Elisabeth quietly posed a question to him.

"So you agree, too, that there can be no other end to this?"

"I've already confirmed it. The creatures nesting in their wombs possess amounts of mana no normal human could bear. Even the ones who have not

swelled up as much are in a similar state. Their organs are destroyed, and their hearts have all stopped. However…”

“In spite of all that, their bodies are alive… Their senses—particularly their sense of pain—are intact, I take it?”

“Demons seek pain. And demon children are no different. It’s a cruel situation. At this point, their only options are to *die giving birth* and to *die without giving birth*. Thus, the question becomes what the merciful thing to do is, and for that, I defer to scripture and my own faith.”

La Christoph made his declaration without hesitation. His voice was cold and resolute.

“I shall grant you salvation, O wretched ones. For who but a saint to bear the burden of purifying you?”

Elisabeth offered no response. In a rare turn of events, there was nothing for her to do here.

If Kaito Sena were here, what would he do?

If his reaction to the Room of Pain was anything to go off, he would have been furious. Trembling with rage, he would’ve cried, *Don’t you have even a little respect for the living?!* For the deed he’d be faced with belied *no respect for them whatsoever*. Yet even so, he’d have chosen to put them out of their misery himself.

This isn’t purification. This is murder—and it’s a burden I should be the one to bear, he’d have said.

He was simply that kind of person. But Elisabeth wasn’t. She cared little about who in particular dealt the coup de grâce. After all, it didn’t change the result. The ones death awaited would die, nothing more.

She took a step backward. La Christoph nodded. Despite his lack of lungs, he took a deep breath, then began chanting his prayer. The words had a pleasant heft to them as they echoed through the room.

“We gather and wait.”

“So hark and rejoice.”

Suddenly, a different voice cut in. Elisabeth narrowed her eyes.

The voice was Lewis’s, but he wasn’t there with them. Elisabeth looked up at the ceiling. The countless lizard engravings were all looking down. One of their eyes must have contained a magic communication device.

The wombs responded to his distant call by beginning to vibrate. Then the sacks of flesh started undulating from within like lumps of soft bread dough. Laughter sounded from within them, crying echoed out from them, and the two merged into a single perverse melody.

Elisabeth could tell.

’Tis a song.

A song of blessing—

—and a song of joy.

The voices were celebrating the most basic pleasure known to any living creature—birth.

“The hammer falls on thee!”

“Be born unto joy and love!”

La Christoph and Lewis’s voices overlapped completely.

Lewis’s words were ironic and bordering on blasphemous, but at the same time, they were completely true. The mixed-race folk sought greater weapons. The babies’ birth would bring them joy. And the babies would surely be loved.

Elisabeth knew.

No matter how malignant a weapon may be…

…Any blade that lopped off a hated foe’s head would be loved all the same.

And the world would keep turning, just as properly as ever.

“”Ah, aah, ah, AH, ahh, AAAAAAaaaaaaAaAaAaAAAAAA!””

The choruses rang out. La Christoph’s ribs opened. A vast flock of skylarks took flight.

As they did, the wombs burst open. A perversely satisfying popping noise filled the hall as skin split and tore. Chunks of fat and flesh sprayed through the air. Organs, now fully liquefied, gushed out as the babies thrust their gray arms upward. It was a horrible, grisly spectacle. Yet even so, someone had wished for that birth.

Seeing that made Elisabeth realize something.

Perhaps the world, which turned so properly—

—had been doomed from the very beginning.

“NOT ON MY WATCH!”

“…Hmm?”

Then a very out-of-place voice echoed through the air.

Elisabeth instinctively whirled around. A mass of copper-red fur was racing toward her like a fireball. Her eyes went wide. Without a moment’s hesitation, the voice’s owner brandished *his* sword.

“HAVE AT YOUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUU!”

“Why, you’re—!”

With an air-splitting cry, the man leveled a beautiful slash. The broad side of his sword grazed Elisabeth’s hair, then smashed the face of the baby who’d been stealthily approaching her. Amniotic fluid splashed around her would-be assailant as it crumpled to the ground.

“There’s more coming!”

The man slammed the back of his blade into another one’s abdomen. It did a tailspin through the air, then slammed into the wall with a horrible splatting noise. *Good eye*, Elisabeth thought, nodding in admiration.

Slashing attacks didn’t work on demon children.

They may have been defective products, but the babies had still inherited their parents’ physical properties. The man had probably learned this from the huge number of Ragnarok foes that couldn’t be harmed by swords. He was instinctively using his long sword as a bludgeoning implement. Not only was it clever, but his blows were also quite fast for how hefty they were.

Yet as always, he relies too heavily on brute strength.

"Phew… That should keep us safe for the time being."

After confirming that their foes had been temporarily rendered powerless, the man—a beastman with a copper-red wolf's head—exhaled heavily.

Elisabeth was well acquainted with the fighting style, as well as with the man using it. In the Peace Brigade, which she was captain of, he was her second-in-command. He was a seasoned warrior, and when Kaito Sena had been around, he had been one of his closest friends.

But more importantly, he was someone who had no business being there.

"Lute!"

Elisabeth turned to her subordinate, who should have been at the World Tree, and shouted his name.

*

"Ah, Madam Elisabeth, you're all right! Ah, er, Captain Elisabeth, rather. To think it's been this long and I still haven't gotten used to it… I beg your pardon for my persistent rudeness!"

"It's fine. I can't say I much care how you refer to me, but what in the blazes are you doing here?"

"Well, you see, Captain Elisabeth, I— Why, I say!"

Right as Lute was about to answer, the babies hunched over like animals and rushed toward them all at once. They had the curiosity of children, and it would seem Elisabeth and Lute had piqued their interest.

A veritable wave of gray arms came reaching for them one after another. Lute desperately batted their soft, pliable hands away with his sword.

"Damn you cowards, grouping up like that! Face me one at a time like men!"

"…Hmph."

Lute may as well have been talking to a brick wall, but he continued shouting nonetheless. It was no wonder he and Kaito Sena had gotten along. As Lute struggled alone, Elisabeth quickly counted the babies.

The ones in the group's center had been burned up by the skylarks, but many of them had escaped evaporation.

This is looking to be quite a hassle… Come to think of it, how's La Christoph holding up?

Elisabeth glanced to her side. La Christoph was completely unharmed. For some reason, though, he was tilting his head to the side. It didn't look like he was emotionally shaken or anything, but he seemed to be having trouble wrapping his mind around Lute's sudden arrival.

Once she realized that, Elisabeth finally figured out what was going on.

"Hmm… 'Twould seem that while you're fit to command in dire situations, when it comes to matters involving yourself or unexpected aid

such as this, you're a little slow, aren't you? Or rather, quite slow, 'twould seem."

"It's a weakness all saints share, but I do have deficiencies when it comes to common sense and knowledge of customary reactions. As such, I'm afraid I can't make an accurate comparison, but…if the worldly Torture Princess says it is so, then I imagine you're right."

"I don't know about '*worldly*.' It merely… I don't know… It seemed as though you were spacing out—"

"Rgh! What are these foul creatures?!"

Elisabeth blinked in surprise. Now that she noticed, Lute's situation had grown somewhat dire.

One of the babies had grabbed hold of his sword and was gnawing on its point. In seconds, it began crumbling away into sand. Flustered, Lute fell back.

The moment he did, Elisabeth snapped her fingers.

"Holy Water Sprinkler."

Several spiky iron balls came crashing down from the air. Each ball happily bounced around, landing on the babies' heads over and over and riddling them with holes.

Fountains of blood gushed up and painted the ceiling red. As the babies crumpled to the ground, the balls bounced back and carefully ran their bodies over. After a certain point, the babies couldn't take the attacks anymore, and their bodies broke down. Darkness and crimson flower petals splashed down and floated atop the amniotic fluid.

Shortly after, the babies breathed their last.

Lute heaved a sigh of relief. He retrieved his sword and inspected the damage to the blade. Before he could get far, though, he sensed Elisabeth's questioning stare bearing down on him. He leaped to his feet and began talking.

"Ah, that's right! You wanted to know what I was doing here. After we parted ways, our group successfully rendezvoused with the World Tree's guard squad. Your prediction was right, Madam Elisabeth—nobody else was harmed. Then after we relayed the sad news of the imperial princesses' passing, we heard about the attack on the demi-humans. When I found out you went in alone, I knew I couldn't merely stand by, so I searched high and low for some way I could help…but my men stepped in to stop me before I could make too big a fool of myself. But right when I was truly at a loss, *he* invited me to join him."

"…Who?"

"Then we decided to rescue you together! Now, um, I realize it's a bit late to ask, but…what *were* those things?"

Lute's tail curled up timidly. Elisabeth narrowed her eyes.

Now she finally knew how Lute had been able to act so normally.

He never saw the "mothers," nor did he see the babies themselves being born.

Elisabeth cast her gaze back inside the hall. Not only had the mothers popped, but many of them had been completely burned away. Now their charred, scattered remains were barely even recognizable as having been human.

After seeing the light from La Christoph's attack, Lute had probably charged in without thinking about things too hard. He still didn't understand what had actually happened there. It was very like him. But perhaps it was also for the best.

Someone like Lute would be happier not knowing the tragedy's specifics.

However, Elisabeth thought, frowning, who in the world could have invited him there?

Jeanne and Izabella aside, I find it hard to imagine anyone who would dare to try rescuing the Torture Princess and the saints' representative with a mere two men.

In fact, she couldn't think of a single person who might. She racked her brains, baffled.

The moment she did, there came a peculiar sound. Elisabeth whirled around once more.

A new individual was walking their way, his pointy shoes clicking as he did. He spoke in a hoarse voice.

"I can't say I condone charging in without confirming the situation first, Sir Lute. And not only that, but you left me behind as well… Our races have been close for some time, true, but goodness gracious, how your people's hotheadedness irks me…"

The man was garbed in a coarse robe designed to keep out sand. Claws and scales gleamed on his hands.

He fussily adjusted the glasses atop his lizard nose. It was often difficult to make out a demi-human's facial expression, but the sarcastic smile on his face was all too plain to see. Elisabeth was shocked.

Of all the people she'd been expecting to see, he certainly wasn't one of them.

"Aguina? Aguina Elephabred?!"

"Just Aguina is fine, Madam Elisabeth Le Fanu. I'm aware of how troublesome our surnames are for people who aren't used to pronouncing them. If you try too hard, you're liable to bite your tongue."

The demi-human high official gave a small bow as he replied. He was in charge of much of his country's foreign affairs, so he spent a fair bit of his time in the World Tree. He must have been abroad during the attack, fortunately allowing him to avoid it.

Still, Aguina is a dyed-in-the-wool blood purist.

It would have made sense if he'd headed for the temple, but there was no way he'd be putting himself on the line to save her and La Christoph. That wasn't the Aguina she knew.

Aguina seemed to have sensed Elisabeth's doubts, as the look in his eyes softened a little.

“Why so surprised? As I hear it, the people in the temple have already been saved. And if that’s the case, then I have but one duty. True, it might not normally seem like any of my concern, but I heard him just as well as anyone—‘this here will be our daybreak.’”

That line was part of the statement the boy proclaiming himself to be the Mad King had made.

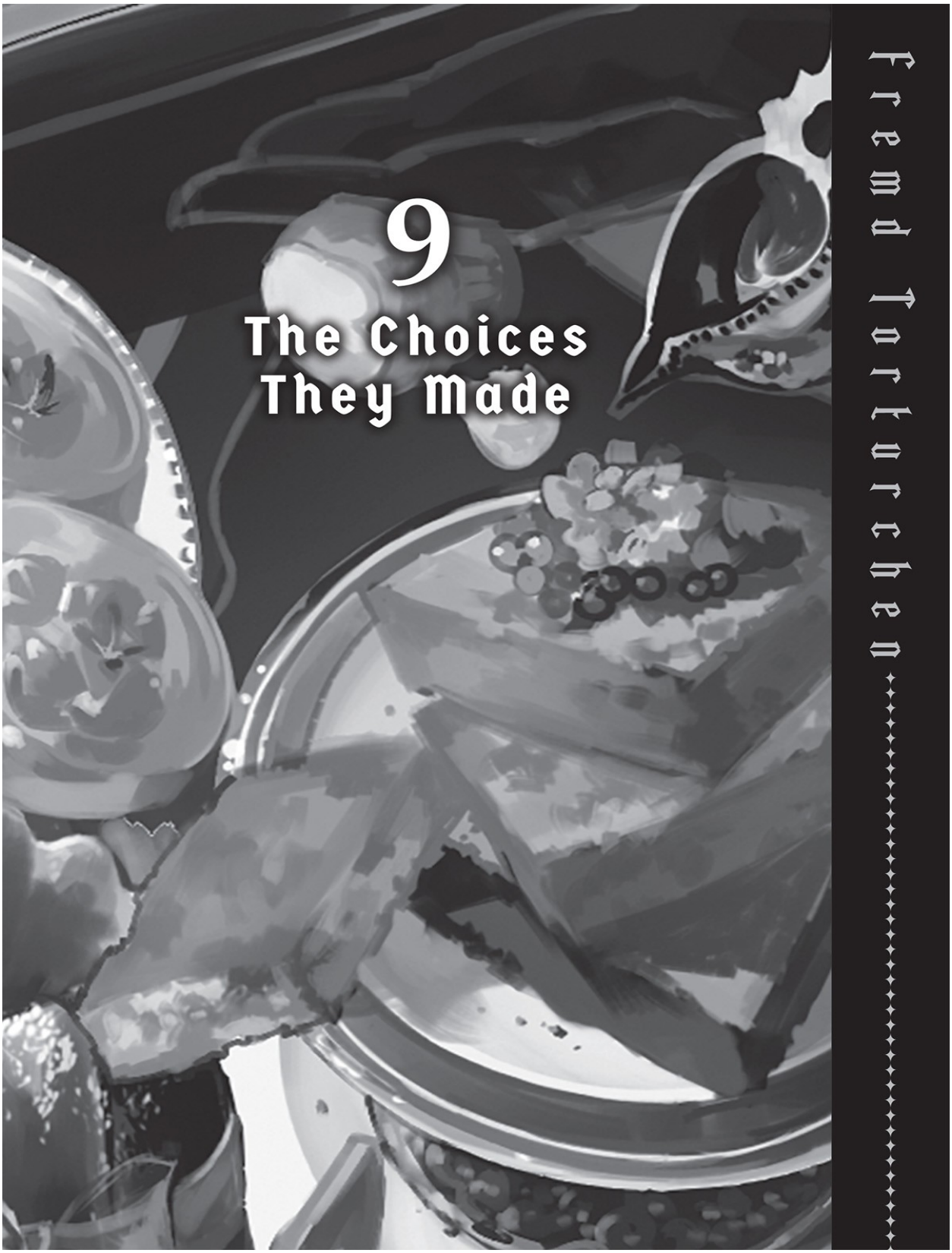
Back then, the child who’d died a meaningless death in another world had spoken words of encouragement to the three assembled races.

“There’s no need to be ashamed. Take up your swords and ready your spears. Our mission is to murder God, and to murder Diablo. Prayers won’t bring us salvation; screams won’t bring us mercy. The only thing we have to rely on is our own strength.

“This here will be our daybreak. Let Ragnarok begin.”

“The sun has in fact risen—thus, we must do everything in our power not to let it set.”

And with that, the man who normally had no interest in anything but blood purity gave her a meaningful smile.



9
The Choices They Made

9
The Choices They Made

The mean old lizard said to a Queen of Hearts,
That he met in the castle,
“Let us both go to law:
I will prosecute *you*.
—Come, I’ll take no denial;
We must have a trial:
For really this morning I’ve too much to do.”
Said the Queen of Hearts to the mean old lizard,
“Such a trial, dear sir,
With no jury or judge,
Would be wasting our breath.”
“I’ll be judge, I’ll be jury,”
Said the mean old lizard:
“I’ll try the whole cause,
and condemn you to death.”

Oh my, Father, it’s not like you to look so sullen. What’s wrong? “What’s with that weird song,” you ask? It’s not weird. That’s rude, Father! …Hmm-hmm, well, if you say so. Oh, you want to know if I came up with it? Well, sort of, but also, not at all. The thing is, I based it off the Mouse’s poem from *Alice in Wonderland*. So you see, I came up with it, but also, I didn’t.

Is it an ironic song, you ask? Oh, sure, maybe.

Is it a happy song, you ask? I don’t think so, no.

Um, well, I just swapped words in and out as I pleased to help kill time while we waited, so I can’t say for certain myself, but…

…maybe it isn’t a sad song, so much as it is a lonesome one?

Trial, *judge*, *jury*… There were a lot of hard words I didn’t understand, but back when I first read it, I made sure to look aaaall of them up. Impressive, right?! Hee-hee…and, um, I found out that one person can’t do all those things alone.

That means the lizard’s a liar.

And lying is such a lonesome thing to do.

*

Death is oblivion.

But it isn’t the end.

Even if someone died, as long as the world was still there, a part of them lived on.

Kaito Sena is dead. Yet even so—

He'd left traces of his life etched vividly in the world.

And it would seem that the painful way he'd lived his life had influenced some most unexpected individuals.

The first was Maclaeus Filliana. In a surprising turn of events, the real king had ended up coming to admire the false one. Learning the specifics of Kaito Sena's heroic life had helped him find the resolve to change his passive, unmotivated lifestyle.

And the second was the demi-human high official Aguina Elephabred.

The words the Mad King had left him with had driven him to come save Elisabeth and La Christoph. As someone who'd inherited the Sand Queen's blood, it was his duty as a blood purist to value his own safety over that of members of other races. For him to risk his life over a non-demi-human was beyond unthinkable. His actions were an exception among exceptions, to the point where they bordered on sacrilege.

Yet in spite of that, he seemed sure of them.

Aguina's robe fluttered as he took the lead and strode off down the hallway. Although he left Lute to man the rear, he didn't look particularly worried about running into new foes from the front.

He shouted back to the others.

"Make haste, everyone! Sir Lute, that goes double for you—you may be heading up the rear guard, but shouldn't a military man entrusted with defending his nation like you are be able to pick up the pace a little more than that? Is that long tail of yours getting in the way, perhaps?"

"Sir Aguina, I say! You would go so far as to besmirch my fine tail? We wolffolk take great pride in our… Hmm? Ah, now that you mention it, they're starting to nibble on it, aren't they? Hey, unhand me at once! Off! Off, I say!"

"…That is why I mentioned it, yes."

"Elisabeth, I'm concerned that you've forgotten, so allow me to remind you once more that I'm perfectly capable of walking on my own. I would greatly appreciate it if you were to stop dragging me. I'm starting to worry about my scalp being torn off."

"You can walk, but you can't run to save your life! And besides, you were long overdue for a haircut anyway!"

Elisabeth's group had quickly become quite lively.

Aguina was leading up the vanguard and guiding them back the way they'd came. As they whizzed past the lizard carvings on the walls, wet, sloppy noises echoed out from behind them.

The babies had made their way out of the banquet hall.

They crawled across the floor on their ashen limbs, the ones with umbilical cords still attached to their "mothers" ripping and tearing the cords as they went. The babies' movements were surprisingly clumsy, but terrifyingly fast all the same.

It was like they defied every law reality attempted to enforce.

One of them reached out and tried to grab Lute's tail again. All the fur on his body bristled up, and he quickly accelerated. The babies apparently found that amusing, and they cackled behind him.

Elisabeth clicked her tongue.

"Tch, 'tis naught but a hassle that we were unable to finish them off quickly! Why, I've half a mind to crush the lot of them like bugs!"

"I empathize wholeheartedly, but I do ask that you restrain yourself. I would rather that we not get buried alive along with them. Plus, think of how expensive the villa would be to rebuild."

"That last part is the least of our concerns at the moment, is it not?"

"I'm told that you humans are in dire financial straits, and our belts are just as tight."

Aguina readjusted his spectacles as he gave his detached response.

Elisabeth clicked her tongue again. Her original plan had been to kill all the babies inside the hall. But as Aguina had pointed out, their only option at the moment was to flee.

Perfected demon grandchildren—vessels with power that bordered that of the ranked demons—would have been one thing, but there was next to no chance the Torture Princess and the saints' representative could lose to incomplete, part-human vessels designed for breeding instead of fighting.

However, even Elisabeth had been forced to admit that continuing to fight wasn't an option.

The reason was simple.

At that rate, the building was liable to collapse.

*

They'd reached that verdict shortly after Aguina showed up.

The babies had just started to regroup. The way they were reaching out their fleshy gray arms seemed almost innocent.

La Christoph narrowed his eyes. The skylarks, following his lead, began flapping their wings in unison. He began chanting his prayer once more. Before he could get far, though, Aguina hastily rushed to stop him.

"Not so fast! Please look over there!"

"Don't just come butting in. What in the world are you…? Ah, I see. Well, that's not good."

After looking at what he was pointing at, Elisabeth quietly nodded. Part of the wall had been completely obliterated, and large cracks were running up the support pillars around it. As they looked at the alarming spectacle, Aguina went on.

"The eastern villa isn't nearly as fortified as the temple, and the banquet hall in particular wasn't designed to endure violent combat. Continued bombardment will likely push it past its limit. And with the stargazing tower situated atop the hall…depending on how it fell, it could very well destroy the entire villa."

“Allowing the damage to spread that far would be a problem indeed… Besides, using a saint’s power indoors was nigh suicidal to begin with. ’Twas an oversight on my part. Now, I would offer to use my torture devices, but then their individual resilience becomes an obstacle.”

Elisabeth cast a fleeting glance at the ground. Aguina gave a small nod of agreement.

The entire stone floor was covered in cracks and fissures. It looked like an egg that was about to split open.

The blame there lay squarely with Elisabeth for having dropped her Holy Water Sprinklers and caused them to bounce and roll around.

Any sort of large-scale attack ran the risk of destroying the villa, but anything less than that was liable to be ineffective. That being the case, though, what was the best way to take them all down without damaging their surroundings?

Whatever their plan was, its first step would almost certainly involve gathering all the babies in one place.

“Hmm… I’ve a number of ideas, but there are simply too many foes here for any of them to work. What to do, what to do?”

“Hraaaaaaagh!”

Elisabeth began thinking of ways to go about attacking them.

Meanwhile, Lute continued his desperate struggle. It looked like the babies were grouping up again. Lute was doing his best to keep them at bay with his sword, but he wasn’t having much luck. In fact, the babies seemed to merely view him as an exciting new toy. Aguina, paying no heed to Lute’s continued plight, raised his hand.

“I have a clever idea, actually. What do you say?”

“You? A government pencil pusher who knows next to naught of battle?”

“None other. These are our lands, Madam Elisabeth, and as such, we hold the advantage.”

Aguina proudly adjusted his spectacles. Elisabeth harrumphed, then went silent.

However, she quickly gave her answer by grabbing La Christoph by the collar. Lute, sensing her intentions, drove the nearby babies back with a tornado-like slash. And as for Aguina, he’d already set off without waiting for their responses.

Elisabeth turned around, then called back to Lute as she followed behind Aguina.

“Make haste, Lute!”

“As you wish!”

“Ah, so it’s back to this again.”

La Christoph obediently let Elisabeth drag him off.

His expression was the very image of resignation.

*

That was how they began their dramatic escape.

Now, though, the situation had changed.

Elisabeth and the others ran into the entrance hall. She raised her head and looked around.

The first thing she spotted was the large staircase leading to the chamber the king stayed in when he visited. The passageway to the concubines' and children's living quarters was tucked quietly behind it. And if you went to the left, you could reach the dining hall.

All they had to do was open the main entrance, and they'd be outside. They could probably also find the servants' passageway if they looked for it. Whichever they picked, though, the babies would invariably follow them. Elisabeth narrowed her gaze.

A teleportation circle would allow us to flee immediately…but even here, we're still too close to those creatures. 'Twould be an unmitigated disaster if Alice were to take notice and interfere with the circle. And besides, we chose to investigate the babies of our own volition. 'Tis our duty to thin the enemy's ranks while we can, but…

…If the demi-humans ended up demanding compensation for the damage Elisabeth and the others caused, that would be a problem in its own right. After all, they were a famously stubborn people. As Elisabeth pondered, La Christoph raised his hand. Still slanted upward, he offered Aguina a proposal.

"If I bombard them after we make it outside, the villa will remain unharmed. Most of the front garden will get blown away, but…given the circumstances, a sacrifice such as that seems trivial. That's my recommendation. How does that sound?"

"I most certainly object, and that should go without saying! Please don't ask for my approval if you know I'm not going to give it."

Aguina immediately let out a roar of protest. La Christoph tilted his chin down toward his neck and went quiet. It was difficult to tell given the way his body was slanted, but perhaps he was trying to hang his head.

That was when the babies stormed into the entrance hall. Elisabeth clicked her tongue.

"Tch, always so fussy over every little thing. Why not offer a plan of your own, then?"

"With pleasure! Feel free to use *that* as you please."

Aguina responded to Elisabeth's complaint by pointing overhead. His long claws glinted.

Elisabeth looked up, then nodded. Aguina was right—it was perfect.

"Ah, I see—then use it, I shall."

She raised her right arm straight up and sliced her fingers to the side through the empty air. A biting gust of wind mimicked her motion and cut through the air overhead.

Crimson flower petals burst in its wake, like blood gushing from a wound.

The demi-human concubines were forbidden from going outside as they pleased. As a substitute, though, the villa was adorned with all manner of ornamentations for them to feast their eyes on. And the entrance hall was no exception. Unlike the temple's exceedingly practical lighting system, the hall's high ceiling was lit by an elaborate chandelier. However, the chandelier's design was somewhat peculiar.

Its form was broad and elaborate, calling to mind the image of a vast piece of driftwood mounted in the air.

Either that, or the inside of a snake nest.

Its designer had used soft metal to depict a mass of various types of snakes all coiled around one another. From a human perspective, it was enough to evoke a sense of physiological revulsion, but the demi-humans probably saw it differently.

Each of the myriad snakes held a magical light-emitting jewel in its mouth, and the cluster extended all the way across the wide ceiling, hung delicately balanced with a series of thin, firm chains.

With one fell blow, Elisabeth sliced those chains clean through.

After the initial loud *snap*, the chandelier made its descent astonishingly quietly.

As it did, Elisabeth and the others all quickly leaped away. Elisabeth also gave La Christoph a forceful hurl. His expression was as calm as ever as he glided in a smooth arc across the floor.

Then an earsplitting *KSHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH* filled the air.

The chandelier had come crashing down onto the babies. However, they didn't seem particularly affected.

The most that happened was their springy flesh became a bit depressed. But for a moment, they stopped, as though a giant hand had pressed down on them from above. The ones near the outer perimeter had gotten caught up in the mess of snakes.

That opening was plenty.

"—'Tis done."

Elisabeth tapped her shoe against the ground.

The moment she did, the ceiling and floor slammed together, crushing the babies and the chandelier alike.

Or to be more precise, a pair of large, flat stone slabs crushed them. The two round slabs were adorned with a single golden rod that looked like a barrel organ's handle.

Elisabeth loudly raised her voice.

"It has been some time since I deployed this one! *The Wheel of Death!* Let the grinding commence!"

With that, the rod began spinning of its own accord. A horrible noise rang out as the two slabs started spinning in opposite directions. First, a screaming sound resonated from the chandelier as it creaked and shattered. Then the babies started getting whittled down as well. When their skin split,

though, it came apart more like stone being shaved down than like meat being ground up.

None of them screamed. They merely let out fretful little whines.

Countless tiny hands scrabbled between the two slabs. The way the babies' gray arms were writhing, they looked like caterpillars about to be smushed. One of their heads popped off. It rolled between the slabs, only coming to a stop when it bumped into another head. A disturbingly viscous mixture of flesh and blood oozed onto the ground.

Slowly but surely, the babies' heads were being flattened. Their eyeballs made popping sounds as they flew out of their sockets.

If it wasn't so grisly, it would've almost been funny. But then all of a sudden, the scene reached its end.

When the pressure surpassed the babies' ability to endure it, they exploded into darkness and azure flower petals. The two stone slabs thumped as they finished grinding together. Only silence remained.

"Hmm, as abrupt as it was dull. 'Twould seem their mental faculties were low indeed."

Elisabeth nodded, then snapped her fingers.

When she did, the Wheel of Death transformed back into flower petals. Crimson, azure, and black all scattered around the room. The brilliant bouquet of colors then whirled up and vanished, leaving a flattened hunk of metal lying on the floor as the only proof the grim scene had even taken place.

Upon further inspection, it was the remains of the chandelier. It was an odd sight, yet a perfectly normal one.

And with that, the babies were no more.

*

"Good heavens… I'm glad to see you took them all out. I was on the verge of losing my tail there."

Lute breathed a sigh of relief and perked his drooping ears up. However, they slumped right back down once he saw how mangled his tail had gotten.

"Oof. I don't exactly know what those things were, but they resembled demon underlings, and I could tell they were no proper bunch. Now we can finally focus on escaping."

"Precisely. We need to make haste, as though we were pursuing a white rabbit… Oh? La Christoph, I must say. Saint or not, your hair is in quite a sorry state. It's hardly befitting a man of your stature. Why, what kind of example do you think you're setting for your people in that state? With your permission, allow me to straighten it out for you."

By then, La Christoph was back on his own two feet. Thanks to his rough treatment at the Torture Princess's hands, though, his hair was thoroughly disheveled. Aguina smiled in exasperation and circled behind him.

Using his long claws in place of a comb, he began working the knots out. Apparently, he had an unexpectedly doting side to him. Lute looked warmly at them as he sheathed his long sword.

Elisabeth's expression reflexively softened.

But the moment it did, she was struck by a tremendous feeling of discomfort.

Why was I about to smile?

Elisabeth was perplexed. It was odd for the Torture Princess to be smiling in the first place. But there was also a bigger, more pressing problem. Alarm bells were going off in her mind that *this was no situation to be smiling in*. Elisabeth closed her eyes to try and get her thoughts in order.

Suddenly, she imagined someone wrapping her in an embrace. A man's white-gloved fingers were creeping over her skin as though caressing her. Then her beautiful foster father brought his lips to her ear.

"Whenever did you go so soft?"

"—!"

The voice was dripping with scorn. Vlad wasn't actually there, of course. He was still confined in the royal tomb's basement. In short, the voice was Elisabeth's own, mocking herself for her idiocy.

She quickly flipped through her memories to try and track down the source of her unease. Eventually, an image of Alice drifted up through the darkness. The white ribbons on her hat swayed from side to side as she spoke her incomprehensible gibberish.

"And then down, down, down. Alice fell down a very deep hole. Even though I wasn't chasing a White Rabbit. But at its end, I found Wonderland. See, it's simple, right?"

"Alice, I've told you time and again. People from this world aren't familiar with your Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass stories."

Afterward, Lewis had scolded her. And remembering that reminded Elisabeth of something.

The reincarnated girl's stories, *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, were completely foreign to people from their world. And yet a certain someone had just said something that sounded awfully like a quote from one of them.

"…'We need to make haste, as though we were pursuing a white rabbit.'"

As Elisabeth murmured the words back to herself, she pictured the vast desert.

The demi-human lands were home to golden sand, harsh winds, burning liquids, myriad minerals mass-produced in the Dragons' Graveyard—and towering stone walls.

But they certainly aren't home to any white rabbits.

So then why was that the first analogy that had sprung to Aguina's mind?

And now that she thought about it, that wasn't the only strange thing that had happened.

Given the man's standard routine, it was perfectly plausible for him to have escaped the tragedy due to being abroad.

But then…what of his claim, when he said, "As I hear it, the people in the temple have already been saved"?

Maybe Jeanne and Izabella had made their way back to the World Tree, but given the time frame, there was no way Aguina could have possibly made it to the villa if he'd gone to their arrival site, confirmed that all the demi-humans—including all the ones from the second sector—were all right, and only then recruited Lute on his mission. And besides, Jeanne had known she wouldn't have finished in time to help Elisabeth—that's why she'd told her she was on her own.

How had Aguina known that the rescue mission in the temple was complete? How had he known that Elisabeth would be in the villa, rather than the main palace? Whom had he heard the phrase *white rabbit* from?

But because of the dramatic entrance he'd made, nobody had thought to ask those questions.

"Aguina… Aguina Elephabred!"

Elisabeth called out his name, omitting the specifics of her concerns. The demi-human high official slowly raised his head.

In that moment, Elisabeth realized a number of things.

Or rather, she couldn't help but realize them.

Aguina's thin-pupiled eyes had lost their usual sarcastic gleam. Instead, his golden gaze was as still as a lake shore. The look in his eyes was serious and tinged with a hint of sadness. Yet even so, it was curiously sharp.

It was the gaze of a man pitying the world from on high.

And it was the gaze of a man who knew he had sinned.

Something black softly grazed Aguina's cheek. Long hair rustled by him as the man before him collapsed. Elisabeth's eyes went wide. However, she wasn't particularly surprised, nor was she particularly angry.

For all the scene's cruelty, it made a certain kind of sense.

For that was simply how he was.

And thus, this was the natural result.

As La Christoph crumpled to the floor—

—the gleaming, scale-handled dagger buried in his back came into view.

*

"Huh?"

At first, Lute merely let out a dumbfounded cry. Elisabeth and Aguina faced each other in silence.

La Christoph lay facedown on the ground, unmoving. His partially open lips were faintly visible through his mane of black hair. He silently coughed up blood again and again, the thick red droplets falling feebly to the ground.

Elisabeth took another look at the dagger in his back. The entire length of its blade was covered in purple liquid. She flipped through her memories of Ragnarok, then identified it.

'Twas when the three races faced off against the underlings surrounding the Diablo pillar—they started the battle with a volley of poison arrows.

And they hadn't just been any old poison arrows, either. The poison had come from the underlings themselves. The healers of the three races had analyzed the underling corpses, reproduced their poison, and passed it along to Kaito Sena to have him strengthen it further by imbuing it with mana. Not even a saint stood a chance of neutralizing it.

After the battle, the beastfolk had taken the leftover poison for safekeeping. There was no restriction on demi-humans visiting the section of the World Tree that it was kept in, but getting their hands on it couldn't have been easy. Instead of asking about any of the specifics, Elisabeth merely murmured:

"How very thorough."

"At this stage of the game, failure would have stung the keenest, you see,"

Aguina replied nonchalantly. Lute gaped as he looked between Aguina and La Christoph. Eventually, though, his gaze settled on the dagger.

It would seem he'd finally realized what was going on. Lute ground his fangs.

"Why?"

"Why what? *Which part of it*, might I ask?"

"Why…did you fall?"

The exchange was exasperatingly vague. Lute's question, in particular, was far more ambiguous than befitted a man of action like him. Yet at the same time, it got at the heart of the matter with the precision of a needle.

Every relevant question had been boiled down into those four words. However, Aguina didn't answer.

In the blink of an eye, Lute drew his long sword from its sheath. His red fur bristled up like a raging fire, and his eyes were brimming with hatred, anger, and remorse.

Elisabeth thought back. Back when everyone else was celebrating the end of days having successfully been prevented, Lute alone had continued agonizing. His own weakness and lapse in memory filled him with a deep shame. In that moment, he'd probably sworn to himself never to lose anyone again. Yet now even though the danger was supposed to have passed, someone he was in charge of protecting had died yet again.

He was literally watching it happen before his eyes.

La Christoph wasn't breathing. One of mankind's vital cornerstones had been felled.

Lute's roar split the air like thunder.

"You would sink that low? YOU WOULD SINK THAT LOOOOOOOOOOOOOW?!"

“Do you have any children?”

“What?”

Lute was on the verge of charging Aguina, but he couldn’t help but stop in his tracks. However, Aguina didn’t try to take advantage of the opening his non sequitur of a question had given him. He merely continued, as though simply making small talk.

“Well, everyone knows how devoted of a husband you are, so I assumed that surely you must have a lively little ankle biter or two running around.”

“N-no, we’ve been trying, but…”

“Ah, now I remember. Your wife is a goatwoman, isn’t she? As I understand it, fertility rates between different subraces are low… Do forgive my discourtesy. I’ll be praying for you two to be blessed with a healthy child.”

“What kind of sick joke are you—?”

“We demi-humans are the same, you know. We, too, suffer from low fertility rates.”

Aguina raised his voice to cut off Lute’s angry cry.

Lute ground his teeth. Once more, he’d missed an opportunity to charge. Aguina spoke matter-of-factly.

“Unlike your Three Kings of the Forest, our Sand Queen is but one person. As such, we demi-humans don’t have subraces the way you beastfolk do… My goodness, when did it get like this? You know, when the end of days was looming, I told the Mad King the same thing.”

Aguina gazed off into the distance. From his expression, it seemed as though he was waxing nostalgic for events a century past.

Elisabeth found that fact rather strange. The end of days was long over. A foolish boy had sacrificed himself to stop it. By all rights, everyone should be celebrating their newfound peace.

So why was it, then, that everyone she met seemed to yearn for those bygone days so fondly?

Why did their faces look like that—

—when they remembered that hellish nightmare?

Once again, Elisabeth thought back on the same question.

What exactly would proper salvation have looked like?

“‘Unlike the Three Kings of the Forest, our Queen has long since entered her eternal slumber. Understanding the anguish of our constant decline is beyond other races’—that is what I’m talking about.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is what I said.”

“You mean, that’s it?”

“What more could there be?”

Lute asked. Aguina answered. Their gazes met. Then Aguina slowly spread his arms wide and elaborated. He was so composed that it seemed hard to imagine he’d just committed an act of murder.

“Your late first imperial princess, Madam Valisisa Ula Forstlast, saw it as well. ‘Even now, the beastfolk and demi-humans combined can’t compare with humanity’s numbers. If we assume the underlings will attack all three races in kind, then after Diablo’s threat has passed, when we take the respective damages into account, the gap in power between humanity and the rest of ours will likely only grow.’ And she was right—the chance to overcome that gap has passed us by. And to make matters worse, we demi-humans suffered an additional blow she didn’t factor into her prediction.”

“…The slaughter in the third sector, and the attacks on the first and second, I take it?”

“Exactly. Thanks to the Mad King, we avoided suffering crippling fatalities, but the women and children who perished that day were a heavy loss. If we were to suffer another calamity on that scale, we’d be unable to support pure bloodlines for more than a few more generations at most.”

“What, and you think this is that calamity? You yourself were the one who said your people in the temple were saved. Does that not mark the calamity’s end, as far as you’re concerned?”

As she asked the question, though, Elisabeth got a vague inkling.

There was something she'd overlooked; she was sure of it. Something that nobody but the demi-humans themselves could possibly know.

"It was pointed out to us many times that the pureblood sector's defenses were lacking. As Madam Valisisa so frequently reminded us, 'the pureblood sector's defenses are designed to protect against overland invaders and mixed-blood uprisings. They didn't even consider that attacks might come from above.' However, tearing down the sector boundaries to mend that oversight was deemed infeasible. That's why long, long before the end of days, we made a backup."

"…A backup?"

Elisabeth raised an eyebrow, and Lute looked just as confused.

Elisabeth thought for a moment. Mankind's Church had grown twisted in a similar way. When people grew blindly fixated on an ideal, it could lead them to conclusions that others wouldn't even dare imagine.

That blind fixation had led the Church to sound the bugle on the end of days. What had it driven the demi-humans to do?

"We gathered up a group of people devoted to the cause of preserving our blood purity and founded a settlement in the Dragons' Graveyard. That way, we wouldn't have all our proverbial eggs in one basket if anything were to happen to the pureblood sector—but the settlement fell into the rebels' clutches."

"Wh…why, I've never even heard of such a settlement!"

"I should think not. We've been friends with you beastfolk for many years, but we made sure never to breathe a word of it to you."

Aguina gave Lute's shock a matter-of-fact response. Given that this was the case, it went without saying that they hadn't told the humans, either.

After all, their view of humanity was that they were exclusionary elitists, not even aware of how human-centric their worldviews were.

"How did the mixed-race folk come to learn of it, then? 'Tis nigh absurd, no, losing this backup of yours in such a manner?"

"The settlement is hidden away well between the dragons' bones, so considering that and the fact that the underlings focused on attacking more populous areas, things didn't get dire during the end of days. However, those mixed-race bastards were able to locate it by spending decades tracking our supply lines. For that is how deep their fixation and hatred run."

Elisabeth nodded. The demi-humans were obsessed with blood purity, so it stood to reason that the mixed-race folk would hold them in deep loathing. Plus, those of mixed race were observant and dedicated. The moment they noticed an irregularity in the demi-humans' distribution network, like a caravan traveling along a route it wasn't scheduled to, it would simply be a matter of time before they got to the bottom of it.

And thus, the settlement had fallen into unexpected hands—those of the worst enemy imaginable.

“If they kill off the settlement, preserving our bloodlines will be extremely difficult. No…with the world as dangerous as it’s become in the end of days’ wake, it may well prove impossible. So when they offered to leave the settlement be in exchange for my betrayal, I complied immediately. If that was all it took, I considered it a trivial price to pay.”

Aguina didn’t care whom he had to kill or what he had to destroy.

As Lute held his sword, his hand twitched.

“You craven little… Not only did you turn on us for selfish reasons, you dare boast about the act? You take *pride* in what you’ve done?!”

“Of course. No amount of grieving, boasting, laughing, or crying will change who I am or what I need to do. Why not be brazen about it, then? And also, Sir Lute, back to my original topic…”

“What, you think you and I still have anything to talk about?!”

Aguina’s words were similar to ones the Torture Princess herself had once uttered. To the dead victims, it was all the same. However, being confronted with that cruel fact would drive most people to anger. But when Lute readied his sword, Aguina merely pressed on.

“My son and his family live in that settlement.”

Lute was visibly shaken upon hearing that. Familial love was an emotion he could easily sympathize with.

Because of that, a question had no doubt sprung to his mind. What if it were his beloved wife who had been taken hostage? If that were the case, and if making that choice would simultaneously advance his people’s interests, how could he possibly say no?

From the demi-humans’ perspective, Aguina’s decision was no doubt right and proper.

Yet even so, Elisabeth spoke.

“I’ve two questions to pose to you. Why are you people so obsessed with blood purity? And also…do you truly intend to continue supporting the mixed-race fold as they move to seize control of the world?”

The demi-humans had said over and over that other races could never understand the plight of their decline. But Aguina’s beliefs, if nothing else, were founded on something firmer than that. His actions seemed to have concrete reasons behind them. And the second question was only natural to want to pose to someone who was in the process of betraying the world. The mixed-race folk were aiming to completely revolutionize the world.

Were the demi-humans merely hoping to earn enough goodwill to be spared?

Aguina let out a small sigh. He raised two gleaming claws.

“Sadly, both your questions have but a single, simple answer.”

“Out with it, then.”

“The Mixed-Race Massacre.”

“ _____ ”

He was right—it was simple. They’d reached their conclusion long ago. Everything, from the very beginning to the very end, tied back to that one

foolish act. Mankind had allowed that tragedy to play out, and at that rate, the power disparity between them and the rest of the world was only going to grow. The question then became, which would be better—being ruled by the mixed-race folk or being ruled by the humans?

After all, those were the only two choices.

And by that point, humanity had proven they couldn't be trusted. Both the other two races saw that fact as plain as day.

Apparently, the humans were the only ones who'd failed to realize the implications of living in a world that had survived the end of days.

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"There's little love lost between us and the mixed-race people. But even so, we're more sympathetic toward them than you are—and also more pessimistic. If nothing else, mankind's population is huge. As our people's blood grows more and more diluted, your people will end up assimilating us. And I have little hope for the future that awaits our children once we lose even our nation. Our culture will be exterminated, our riches will be plundered, and the new mixed-race folk will be driven into poverty. *For that is the way such things inevitably play out.* Protecting our blood purity is important to preserve our people's dignity—in fact, it's absolutely essential. As I see it, we have no other choice."

Aguina calmly laid out the reason for his obsession with blood purity. Lute found himself at a loss for words, overwhelmed by Aguina's flowing argument. Eventually, though, the simple beastman spoke up.

"B-but once the races become that intermingled, surely the laws will change to reflect that fact. At that point, there'll simply be no distinction between humans, beastfolk, and demi-humans. They'll only live together in —"

"And just how long do you think it will take to reach that idyllic state of peace and equality? Sir Lute, this is no time to be discussing pipe dreams and fantasies. I believe I've made my answer perfectly clear."

And so he had. It was obvious that he wasn't going to be changing his mind anytime soon. Humanity had both heralded the end of days and committed the Mixed-Race Massacre, and the rebellion taking place was the direct result of their crimes. Aguina went on.

"As Madam Elisabeth's subordinate, you were never informed, but not even Madam Vyade, the Wise Wolf and the second imperial princess, trusted the humans. Given the ongoing rebuilding efforts, the tiniest spark could have burned everything down, so we all held our tongues. But she spent just as long as we have trying to figure out an appropriate way to demand reparations from the humans for the losses we suffered during the end of days."

"…What?!"

Lute’s eyes went wide in shock. He staggered. However, Elisabeth didn’t find that fact particularly surprising. And at the same time, she knew.

The only reason things had been so peaceful those last three years was because there was another reason the demi-humans and beastfolk couldn’t come down too hard on the humans.

Lute, practically shouting, spoke that reason aloud.

“But the world wouldn’t have even been saved if not for Sir Kaito Sena!”

“Aye—because the rest of you sat back and did nothing.”

Elisabeth’s voice was low. Lute’s whole body shook, and Aguina narrowed his gaze at her. His eyes twitched, and he tilted his head at the scornful words being directed at the races that had lost so much.

“I beg your pardon? Would you mind running that by me one more time?”

“Until the end of days came about, until the Mad King made his move—what can you claim to have done?”

The seeds of destruction had been sown all throughout their world, yet everyone had overlooked them and assumed they weren’t their responsibility. They’d taken a horrible sinner and forced all their problems onto her. And this was where it had gotten them.

The Mad King hadn’t been able to prevent all the tragedies, no. But he had prevented the end of the world.

And the fact that he was from another world notwithstanding—

—he was nothing more than a tiny, insignificant human.

“I’ve little interest in assigning blame. Decide that on your own as you please. And I’m well aware of how far faith in mankind has fallen. But allow me to say this: What of your tragedies? What of your discrimination? What of your massacres?! As far as I’m concerned, *none of that matters in the slightest*!”

“E-excuse me? Madam Elisabeth?”

Lute’s eyes went wide in a way that they never had before. After all, his direct superior had just taken a nuanced, intricately tangled series of causes and effects and hurled them all out the window. Surely, they *mattered*, didn’t they? However, Elisabeth had no intentions of recanting her statement.

If saving the world and destroying it are both but mere matters of personal selfishness…

…Then the decision to trust, doubt, hate, or love someone was also just a matter of personal sentimentality.

Based on how those emotions piled up, they could very well bring about the end of days.

The problem was, who would bear the burden of what would come after?

And what would those who bore nothing say?

“Aye, there was plenty of tragedy and despair to go around. I shan’t ask that you join hands like brothers. I shan’t ask that you try to see eye to eye. I shan’t even ask you to forgive them. There can be no atonement for deeds

such as those. But you would fear a blade that hasn't even been unsheathed yet, to the point of creating tragedies anew? You would abandon mankind, betray the world, and get in bed with rebels merely to survive? And moreover, you would ask me to pardon such acts? Not likely, I say—for in the end, you and mankind are no different. *You cling too cravenly to life.*"

Elisabeth bared her teeth. Once, a small portion of mankind had committed horrible acts in fear of death. And this was the exact same. The demi-humans were using the Mixed-Race Massacre to justify their own actions and claim the moral high ground.

It was all the same. Justice had vanished long, long ago.

"After being protected by one who believed in everyone, saved by one who believed in everyone, and allowed to live freely in a world where he now is forced to slumber…you would spout such careless drivel? I find it baffling! Utterly baffling!"

Elisabeth laughed. Humans and demi-humans were both baffling. The boy had known just how horrible people were. He knew that fact remained true, even across worlds. Yet even so, he saw the world as beautiful. Because that was where the people he cared about lived. *"So I'll protect it,"* he'd boasted.

He'd smiled to the very end. And now they were trying to rob that smile of its meaning.

Even though they were the ones he'd protected.

"Everyone is the same. Indeed, even I. We're all but swine, hideous beyond compare. Humanity, demi-humans, beastfolk, mixed-race folk—when you view us not as individuals, but as groups, none of us are deserving of belief in the slightest. Yet even so—"

Even so?

Elisabeth abruptly trailed off. Even so, what? What could she say?

Why, she didn't even know what proper salvation looked like. But then suddenly, someone picked up where she left off.

"Yet even so—I believe. Even to this day, I believe. I believe that God's in his heaven, and that all's right with the world."

"Huh?"

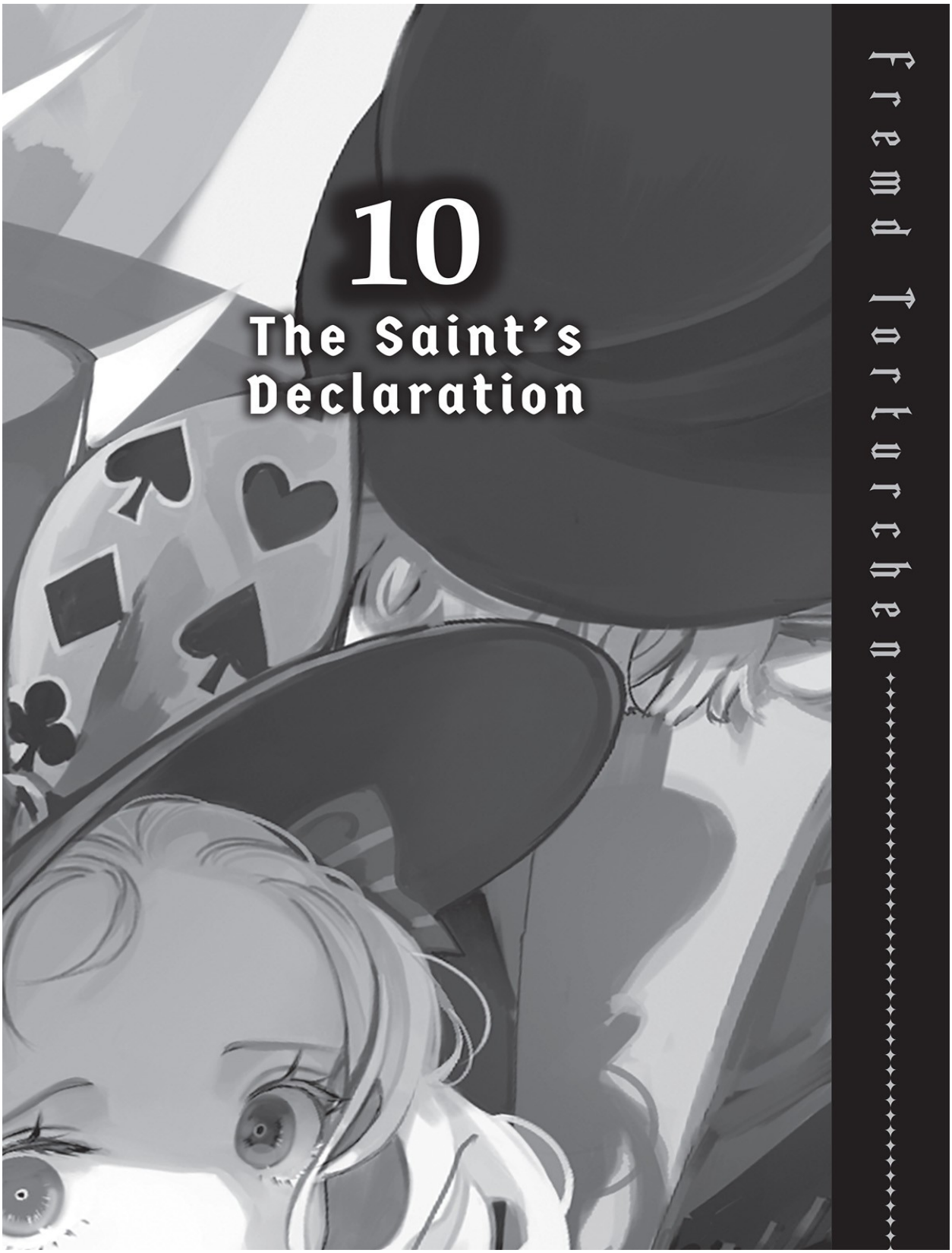
"What?"

"Hmm?"

Elisabeth, Lute, and Aguina all let out dumbfounded cries.

In unison, the three of them turned.

And when they did, they saw the corpse, knife still embedded in its back, slowly rise.



10
The Saint's Declaration

10
The Saint’s Declaration

Shall we be off?

There’s no need for us to hurry as though we were chasing the White Rabbit. Even so, we should stop sitting around like the Caterpillar.

It would seem that everything proceeded according to my instructions. Aguina’s probably carried out his task by now.

It really was unfortunate that we couldn’t find common ground with those two nonconformists. Now that negotiations have broken down, we have no choice but to thin our enemies’ ranks. However, I find it unlikely that Aguina would be able to catch the Torture Princess by surprise. The saint, though, is another… What is it, Alice? I don’t look well?

It’s true, I’ve been better. The anguish hasn’t faded. For in truth, even I know.

Vengeance merely begets vengeance. Despair is a vicious cycle. And demanding atonement from people with no direct connection to the massacre is absurd. Our rebellion will bring about nothing but new tragedies and fresh victims.

We don’t stand to accomplish anything, and it won’t bring anyone happiness. But that’s fine.

Hell only exists within the mind, and ever since the end of days, there’s been a fire burning inside me, one that no amount of rain or tears can quench. So what choice do I have but to throw oil on it?

That way, it can burn and burn and burn and return this whole damn world to ash.

Then once all the hatred and rage and sadness are gone, I’ll finally be able to rest in peace.

Nobody will have to cry anymore. But nobody will be able to smile, either.

Well, so be it. If anything, the fact that people have been able to keep smiling after a tragedy like that is more perverse still. They live such carefree lives, and they’re long overdue for atoning. Because if they don’t, I won’t be able to forgive them. Nor will my comrades. And the dead won’t be able to move on. Still, though, a thought does cross my mind sometimes.

If only God were more merciful.

Were that the case, there might have been another way.

But even if there were—

—I’m sure I would have still chosen the same path.

It’s stupid, I know.

Nothing but irredeemable stupidity.

Just that.

Nothing more.

*

“First of all, I’d like to set your minds at ease. Your initial assessment, that I was dead, still holds true. As of now, I can no longer be counted among the living in good faith. Counting me among the dead is far more apt.”

“Concern for others should hardly be your top priority in a situation like this! And besides, ’tis illogical for a dead man to be moving… Ah, no, I see now. You didn’t have a heart or lungs to begin with.”

Upon hearing La Christoph’s overly earnest statement, Elisabeth squeezed the bridge of her nose.

The Modest Birdkeeper had lacked many key organs from the beginning. As a saint, La Christoph was a man who existed on the boundary between life and death. Even the poison coursing through his veins wasn’t enough to keep him from being able to speak.

That being said…, Elisabeth thought as she shifted her gaze. After double-checking his wound, she shook her head.

“…How long until you *break down*?”

“I’m afraid I can’t say. I’m no healer…and even if I were, I imagine I would have quite a difficult time diagnosing a nonliving body. That aside, the necrosis is advancing rapidly. Once my body fully decomposes, even these lips I’m talking with right now will rot away. It won’t be long until I transition from a ‘talking corpse’ to a mere pile of flesh.”

“Y-your body… What in the…?”

“I’m aware of how unseemly it is, my good beastman soldier, and I’m sure I’m not very pleasant to look at right now. However, I do ask you quell your fears to the best of your ability. This body was granted unto me by God, and as such, I take great pride in it.”

Lute had let out an alarmed yelp at La Christoph’s grim condition, and the saint gave him a calm reply. La Christoph’s cheeks had begun slowly caving in, and his gums and teeth were visible through the round holes in them. Meanwhile, his eyes were growing dull from their outer perimeters inward.

Elisabeth had been right—he was little more than a rotting corpse. The poison burned through human flesh like it was nothing. Even without organs to destroy, enough damage to the outside of his body would be enough to end La Christoph’s existence once and for all.

The fact that he was still able to move despite the horrific transformation he was undergoing seemed too cruel to be called divine protection. If anything, it was closer to a curse.

Even so, though, Lute hurriedly saluted him.

“My deepest apologies! I consider it a great honor to be able hear the final words of the saints’ representative…and I can only pray that you will forgive me for my abject failure to protect you.”

“As far as that’s concerned, you have nothing to worry about. I simply left myself open for a moment. More than just a moment, in fact. But that was all there was to it. May God’s blessings and guidance be with you henceforth.”

“Goodness me, I can’t say I expected this… Who would have thought he was this inhuman?”

As Lute expressed his respect for the dead man, and La Christoph responded with gratitude, Aguina let out an astonished murmur. He reflexively adjusted his already perfectly straight spectacles a number of times.

“I even knew how alien your body was, so I should have been more careful. It would seem I’ve been negligent.”

“Not at all, Aguina Elephabred. Your plan succeeded. I’m well and truly a decomposing corpse now. I see no need for anyone to chastise you. Don’t you agree? I’m sure this is enough to satisfy you…my friend.”

La Christoph directed the firm statement behind Aguina.

Elisabeth narrowed her eyes. Black darkness and azure flower petals were dancing at the edge of her vision. After revolving about in a spiral, the two colors compressed themselves into a sphere. Then with a *pop*, the sphere burst like a balloon.

A girl in a blue bondage dress and a man in all black stood in its wake.

It was Alice Carroll, the Fremd Torturchen, and Lewis, the mixed-race rebel.

For some reason, Alice was pouting with her cheeks puffed up. She glared at Elisabeth. Lewis cast his expressionless gaze toward La Christoph, then murmured quietly to the saint on death’s door.

“For your edification, as well as his… Yes, this was all part of my scheme. It’s a great shame, though, La Christoph. I really did believe that you and I could become friends. None of that was a lie. Yet you chose to flee with Elisabeth and slaughter the babies. Given the nature of saints, it’s perfectly reasonable we weren’t able to see eye to eye, but…there’s still just one thing I can’t for the life of me make sense of.”

“What might that be?”

“Your compensation. The reward you felt was worth destroying the world and betraying all creation for. You told me that the world was going to end regardless, but there was something you wanted to obtain before it did.”

Elisabeth nodded slightly. It made sense that they’d offered La Christoph compensation as well.

As Lewis talked, the stench of rotting flesh grew ever stronger. The skin sloughed off La Christoph’s fingers. However, neither of them seemed to be in much of a hurry. Lewis posed his question with the utmost sincerity.

“What exactly were you planning on asking me for? Please do tell me before you rot away.”

“A star.”

“What?”

“I was going to ask you for a star.”

It wasn’t just Lewis—Elisabeth, Lute, and Aguina all looked utterly baffled as well.

The request wasn’t just impossible; it was flat-out nonsensical. It certainly wasn’t something one could demand in exchange for destroying the world and betraying all creation. And it wasn’t something that made sense for a saint to want, either. It was like the kind of silly thing a child would dream up.

La Christoph offered no particular reaction to their shock. He simply went on, his voice unfailingly tranquil.

“Back when you asked me what I wanted, a memory from before I was canonized suddenly welled up inside me. It was night, and I had glanced up above the walkway’s covering. I don’t know what season it was. I don’t know what happened before or after. But for a moment, a fragment of that scene spread in front of me like a painting. I saw the beautiful stars speckling the clear night sky, and I remembered how, on that day in my childhood, I wanted one of them for myself.”

“…That sounds like little more than a trifling whim.”

“Is it, though? Up until I remembered that, I had never once felt a single earthly desire, such to the point where it caused me to doubt whether or not I was really even human. Yet it turned out that even I once cradled something akin to a wish.”

La Christoph spoke almost as though he were talking about someone else. He blinked. The moment his swollen eyelids opened back up, his left eye spilled out and fell to the ground. Undeterred, he asked his question with a childish earnestness.

“Well, my friend? Had I made the request, would you have been able to grant it?”

The answer, of course, was no.

It was a fundamentally impossible wish to grant. Lewis remained silent. La Christoph smiled, his empty eye socket in full view, then spoke once more. This time, his voice was that of an adult lecturing a child.

“We all are foolish creatures. We let greed blind us, we let fear sway us, we let death terrify us, we lose sight of God, we neglect our prayers, and we commit sins for selfish ends. Yet so, too, are we taken with absurd notions such as wishing for stars. That’s simply the kind of beings we are. Abstract and fleeting as they are, we see beauty in beautiful things, and it inspires us to dream. Would you deny even that foundation and cast it into the void? Would you place shackles on those who’ve yet to sin?”

“Please stop talking. That’s enough. You and I will never see eye to eye; that’s abundantly clear to me now. You needn’t strain your throat any

further before you rot away completely. I'm sure just breathing is painful enough."

"You speak of my pain, but…have you truly considered what it means to judge even the sinless? Are you truly prepared to accept the gravity of destroying the potential for children to look up at the sky and dream?"

"I said, that's enough!"

"Will it be enough to satisfy you, my friend? O ye who called me, La Christoph, a friend."

There was no reproach in the decaying saint's voice, only sincere concern. After all, there was no way to sate the hunger that was vengeance. Only hell awaited those who tried.

However, Elisabeth knew he was being naive. Lewis's response was immediate.

"I'm just as much a living corpse as you are. Satisfaction was never my aim. But as things are, I cannot die. That's all."

No matter how hard he struggled, he would never find salvation. Lewis himself admitted that, just as Elisabeth had expected him to. He had chosen the path of vengeance after having his forgiveness utterly betrayed. He hated the world and, as such, had decided to destroy it. He knew his wounds would never heal, but he had no choice but to fight on anyway.

Even if it meant nobody would be saved.

Upon hearing the avenger's words, La Christoph shook his head.

"Then this is what I have to say—to you, and to all the other sinners, **may you find salvation.**"

Suddenly, La Christoph moved his arms. His white bones were stained with bits of flesh and exposed all the way from his palms to his wrists. Trembling, he raised his torso upright.

Inside his rib cage, the skylarks were violently flapping about. They could sense their keeper's imminent death. In stark contrast, though, La Christoph himself wove his words together leisurely. Hearing that, the skylarks grew still.

"We gather and wait."

"Father…"

Alice's voice was stiff as she looked to Lewis for guidance. Meanwhile, La Christoph continued his prayer. As he did, the situation inside his ribs took on an even greater change—the skylarks were melting much the way his flesh was.

"I bow before thee and make now my humble entreaty."

…Hmm?

Suddenly, a chill ran through Elisabeth. La Christoph's prayers were a way to convey his will to his divine beasts, and through them, God, whom he was directly connected to. The specific words he used weren't important.

As such, he would often make minor changes to them to reflect the situation. But that very clearly wasn't what was going on this time. La Christoph continued his appeal, stretching his prayer longer and longer.

“Hear me, O Lord. I offer up my body and prayer as praises unto thee, kneeling before you and prostrating myself that I might make my request. Please grant mercy unto all those who ask for forgiveness.”

Those…those are the Words of a Sacrificial Lamb.

Elisabeth could sense it. It was a saint’s final prayer they would ever direct toward God.

And it marked the moment of their death.

As he spoke, his connection to God grew stronger than his flesh could withstand. The dissolved skylarks began melting together as viscously as honey. The resulting liquid had a glossy golden sheen, and it gushed out of his ribs and began coursing through his frail veins. The divine beasts were encroaching on La Christoph’s body and filling him to the brim.

It was an utterly horrifying transformation.

Lewis silently gave Alice’s back a little push. Her eyes flashed, just like they had once before.

“Why yes, that’s right—bad little boys don’t get to come to our tea party!”

Alice flicked her wrist, and a teaspoon manifested out of the air. She clearly intended to kill La Christoph before he could launch his attack. Elisabeth and Lute got ready to intercept.

But then something happened the moment before her little hand could catch the teaspoon.

“Huh?”

Whiff.

Alice’s wrist passed it by, then continued on through the air in a straight line. Her arm had been sliced clean off.

The teaspoon clattered to the ground. Elisabeth blinked, as did Lute. Neither of them fully comprehended what it was they’d just witnessed.

And Alice, it seemed, was no different. She gazed at her arm and the blood gushing from it and let out a bewildered cry.

“Huh? What? Huh? I’m fine, but it hurts all the same. Who did—? Hweh!”

“Alice, I know it hurts, but you can’t let your confusion distract you. Fall back.”

Lewis retrieved Alice’s arm by snatching it out of the air, then used his other hand to grab Alice by the hem of her dress and pull her backward. Not a moment later, a sharp blade carved a second slice through the air right where her head had been just a second before.

The blade’s wielder was neither Elisabeth nor Lute. It was a third party, one who looked remarkably familiar.

At some point, an oddly familiar figure had appeared before Alice and Lewis.

They were short, and their body was covered in tattered black rags. Their face wasn’t visible beneath their hood, but there was a dagger faintly

peeking out of the edge of their sleeve. And it was a dagger Elisabeth recognized well.

It was the dagger a certain man had once used to slice his own arm off.

"…Butcher?"

The words dribbled weakly from Elisabeth's lips. Lute gasped in disbelief. However, the figure offered no reaction. From beneath their rags, they silently kicked at the ground a few times.

Red blood raced across the floor, then formed a circle around Elisabeth and Lute. Darkness and flower petals began gushing up into the air as a teleportation circle traced itself at their feet. Elisabeth, immediately realizing what was going on, ground her teeth.

You would have us flee?! Aye, the situation calls for retreat. But—!

La Christoph's bombardment was going to be stronger than ever before. Being in the same room as him was hardly an option. Now that there was no risk of him getting killed before his attack could go off, escaping was the prudent course of action. La Christoph had no doubt made the choice he had out of a belief that the two of them would be able to get out on their own in time. However, leaving this bizarre situation as it was wasn't the greatest plan, either. In spite of that, though, the teleportation circle began activating on its own. Lute made to dash out.

In a flash, Elisabeth reached her verdict. She grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back to her side.

"La Christoph! …Rgh, Madam Elisabeth, why?! La Christoph's going to —!"

"No. Stay. If we flee the circle now, we'll never make it out in time. We shan't know what's happening, nor whose work this was, but…we can't stand to lose any more valuable personnel."

"But—!"

"La Christoph is already dead. If your sole objective is to save him, you'd best cast it aside. All it will bring about is more bodies."

Elisabeth's voice was cold and hard. Lute gulped and went silent. With his shoulder still in her hand, he ground his fangs and stopped trying to move. Meanwhile, Elisabeth continued staring at the dark figure's back.

The short, tattered-clothed figure stooped over a little. They were looking at La Christoph, and when they did, the saint seemed to see inside the figure's hood. His remaining right eye went wide.

His collapsing face curled into a grotesque smile.

Seeming somehow relieved, he let out a murmur.

"Ah… So…y…ou……came…"

As disjointed and faltering his voice was, it sounded remarkably calm. The next moment, his right eye rapidly swelled up from within and ruptured. Blood and putrefaction fluid dribbled down his cheek like tears. Elisabeth shifted her gaze toward Alice.

Alice was in the middle of struggling to reattach her severed arm. Plus, La Christoph's body was about to give out. Now was their only chance.

However, she was aware that La Christoph's consciousness would be hazy, so she knew she had to call out to him.

Even though she also knew that doing so would spell his death.

"La Christoph, now!"

"…Ah…yes. Thank you…for telling…me. I will put an end…to this."

The Torture Princess had told the dying man to die.

La Christoph opened his mouth and spoke with unbelievable clarity. He imbued his prayer with his firm will as he brought it to its close.

His closing words were ludicrous, a prayer that would never be granted.

"—And may salvation find us all."

Suddenly, his back split open. Flesh and spine came bursting out, and a voice outside the range of human perception split the air. Something had broken free from the cage that was La Christoph and was beginning to take flight.

A pair of golden wings unfurled.

They belonged to a massive bird, larger than even the ones La Mules had once wielded.

Appearing to have deemed La Christoph's innards a hindrance, it sprayed them across the room. As it did, a red wall rose up to obscure Elisabeth's vision.

Yet even so, she saw it all the same.

When the man who'd devoted his life to prayer and devotion met his end, it was hideous, gruesome, and surprisingly tranquil.

La Christoph quietly closed what little remained of his eyelids.

His face was that of one who didn't doubt for a moment that his prayer had reached God.

And his expression was that of a boy looking up at the stars.

He smiled—

—knowing that God was with him.

Aguina Elephabred's Account from after the Fact ✦✦✦

I felt it was my duty to give an account of that blast.

For it was ever so beautiful and ever so hideous.

And at the same time, it was a fitting display to inspire belief in God's might.

Now I understand—humanity's long history of believing in the Saint was fostered in no small part by regular sacrifices such as that one.

Saints give themselves up for their divine summoned beasts, and such creatures are more than enough to convey to their flock the horror and majesty of otherworldly entities.

After all, how could anyone not believe that "God's in His heaven" after witnessing such a sight?

However, now that the end of days has passed us by and God's and Diablo's existences have been proven to all in the affirmative, I question how much meaning that holds anymore.

Unfortunately, nobility alone is not a means unto itself.

The battle we are waging is one for our very survival, and we intend to use even God and Diablo to prevail in it. In a war fought with only the finest mages and magics, it matters little how sublime a divine beast is if it cannot obliterate its foes without a trace in a single blow.

Ah, but even so, I will not forget.

For better or for worse.

I will not forget the words that man spoke while on death's door.

How ridiculous is it, wishing for a star?

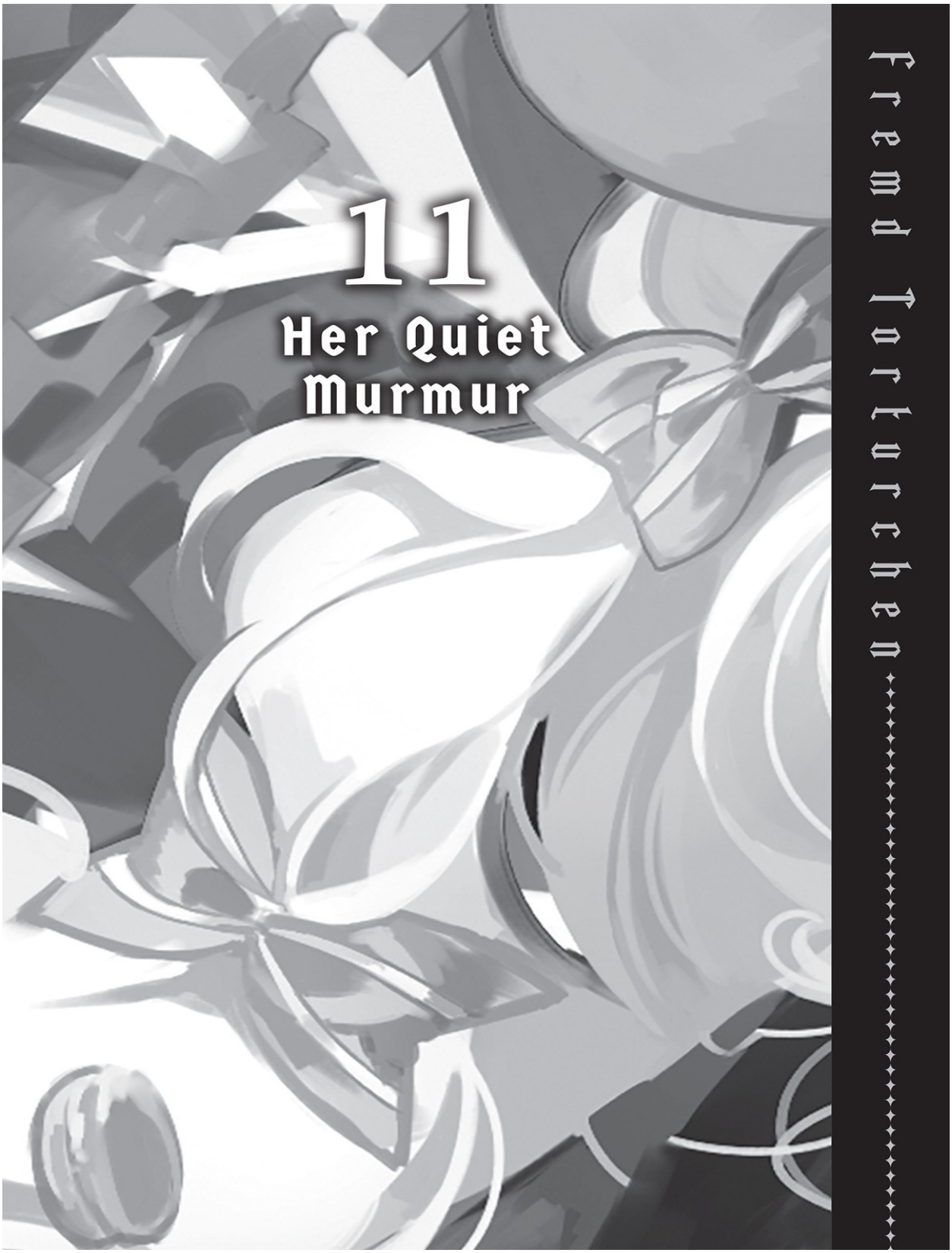
Yet how much better off would we be if everyone's wishes were so simple and so pure?

As I help collect these small, scattered limbs, I find myself filled with a profound sense of grief.

However, I feel no regret.

No, not the tiniest shard of it.

For I am and shall always be a traitor who knows no shame.



11
Her Quiet Murmur

11
Her Quiet Murmur

"…Father? Hey, Father?"

"Alice, don't force yourself to talk. You may be accustomed to pain, but I'm sure this is harsh, even for you."

"Oh, no, I'm fine… If I'm not talking, I won't be able to keep calm. That was awful. Truly, truly awful. Dark magic doesn't work right against sacred beasts. Even though I used Humpty Dumpty, my legs and arms are lying all about, like in Mother Goose's 'The Untidy Man.' Why, it's a wonder I even survived. But I'm just glad you didn't get hurt, Father. You didn't get hurt, did you?"

"No. Thanks to you, I'm fine. I'm sure everyone will sing your praises, saying I don't deserve to have a daughter half as wonderful as you."

"Tee-hee. Well, that's good, then. I got a compliment from you, Father, and that's plenty enough for me. It was awful, though, the way the lizard man survived by sneaking into our egg."

"He is working with us, you know. Please find it in yourself to forgive him."

"Oh, all right… By the way, Father, were you looking for a friend?"

"…What makes you think that?"

"Well, it looked like you were trying to get along with that bird guy… So I was wondering if you'd wanted to be friends with him."

"I suppose I did. But I misjudged him. He, too, was one who was taken from, but he and I weren't able to understand each other.

"The two of us could never have become friends. The cloths we were cut from were simply too different."

"Oh, I see… Well, that's sad."

"And I'm sure you're disappointed, too, no? You'd been looking forward to it so much, but you weren't able to make the friend you'd hoped."

"Ah, that's right! That's right; Elisabeth was horrid! She would get mad out of nowhere and go on and on about the most confusing, incomprehensible things! I was so sure she'd be able to understand my pain. So why, I wonder?"

"That should go without saying, I think. Your very existence lay outside her ability to comprehend, young lady."

"Shut up, lizard man. Next time you talk out of turn, it's off with your head! But that's right… Maybe she just got the wrong idea about me."

"…The wrong idea, hmm?"

“She’s too far away to talk to now…but you got the wrong idea about me, Elisabeth. We’re the same, he and I. Kaito Sena’s position and mine are opposites, that’s all. And good and evil can change ever so easily.

“I’m sure you know that, too.

“So I’m confident that it won’t be long.”

*

The image of burning gold was covered up by a crimson wall.

The bloody hue filled Elisabeth’s vision. Soon, small fissures began spidering their way across the wall. Then with a sharp *crack*, it shattered, exposing a sight that Elisabeth was quite familiar with.

It was a well-sanitized room that had been built in a massive recess inside a tree. Cots were lined up at regular intervals atop its smooth, level floor, and flower-laden vines hung from the ceiling as makeshift curtains.

They were in the area that had once been set up as the World Tree’s interim infirmary.

Even after the end of days was averted, they’d decided to have it continue operating as is as a countermeasure against exceptional disasters.

At the moment, the room was filled with the smell of disinfectant—but that wasn’t all.

There was also the rusty reek of blood.

Elisabeth quickly glanced around the room. There were drops of blood on the floor between the cots, and the infirmary’s patients were all huddled in a corner. Due to Elisabeth and Lute’s abrupt arrival, they were looking at them with shock on their faces.

What exactly happened here?

What had happened, and how had it ended?

A few healers were about, cleaning the soiled ground with hygienic masks covering their mouths. One of them looked up. After giving instructions to the other confused healers, the goat-headed woman walked over to Elisabeth and Lute and removed her mask.

“I can’t say that’s the way I expected you to come back, Lute. In theory, only those who’ve received permission from the World Tree itself can teleport in or out of it. It came as quite a surprise, seeing you appear like that.”

“Ain? You’re back from your dispatch already?! And that blood… What in the world happened?!”

It was Lute’s wife, Ain. Upon hearing her words, Elisabeth frowned. It was true; the Three Kings of the Forest’s home, the World Tree, was no easy place to invade. Yet she and Lute had been sent there directly, and by a mysterious individual who’d been dressed the same as the Butcher, no less.

In short…whoever they were, they had the World Tree’s blessing?

“The group of demi-humans who took refuge in the World Tree was suffering from acute fatigue, so I was asked to return at once. Also, I heard

that our people had been attacked, so I knew we would need skilled healers. I came back as quickly as I could, but…as you can see, the situation turned ugly."

"What happened? You're not hurt, are you, dear?"

"If I were wounded, do you think I would be so negligent in treating it?"

"No, I suppose not… Then who—?"

"Some of the demi-humans turned on you, then?"

Elisabeth cut Lute's question off with one of her own. Lute's shoulders jolted.

It was an obvious conclusion to draw. After all, there was no way that Aguina Elephabred was the sole demi-human who'd turned against the three races. Plus, the World Tree was hard to attack and easy to defend.

However, nobody would have expected an attack from within, and the demi-humans from the first sector, the royalty, and the high officials had already been invited to evacuate here. For the traitors, it was the best opportunity imaginable. It still wouldn't be easy, but if they could cause a panic and kidnap the Three Kings of the Forest during the mayhem, victory would be theirs. However…

"Given that you're spending your time cleaning, though, I take it you avoided the worst-case scenario."

"I see it won't be difficult filling you in. After they arrived, and while they were being led to the area with the guest quarters, the demi-humans turned on us. The human king came running, but they captured him, then began making their way to the lower levels. Some of them even tried to use themselves as suicide bombers to stop our forces from pursuing them—but before they could, their explosives were all disabled. We had Madam Izabella Vicker and Madam Jeanne de Rais to thank for that."

Elisabeth nodded. That made sense. Jeanne turned into an idiot when it came to matters involving Izabella, but for everything else, she was quick on the uptake and calm and decisive when she acted. Throwing her for a loop was no easy task.

If the hostages she'd been charged with protecting turned on her, she wouldn't hesitate to demolish them.

"The human king is safe now. Most of the fighting happened around the guest quarters, but a group of demi-humans who'd been brought to the infirmary tried to take the other patients hostage by force, so we had to deal with them."

"Hmm? You mean to say the carnage here was your doing?"

"Not to worry. Most of this is from little more than nosebleeds. We may have caused hemorrhaging in a few lungs, but nothing serious enough to do permanent damage."

Ain was forthright with her answer. Beastfolk healers couldn't use magic, but their skill with herbs was unparalleled, and they had extensive knowledge of the three races' physiologies. Plus, although Elisabeth hadn't known about it, it would appear they also went through regular military

training, perhaps so as to be able to function better when they had to serve as battlefield medics. A pained look crossed Lute's face. It looked like the two of them might have quarreled about the subject in the past, but now it had come as the situation's silver lining.

However, Ain's gaze darkened.

"That said, the situation quickly got messy. The thing is, not all the demi-humans were working with the traitors."

"…They weren't?"

"Many of them—women, children, the king's relatives, and the like—hadn't been apprised of the coming rebellion. Is that about the shape of it?"

"That's right. They were shocked, and some of them even tried to protect us. At first, we couldn't make sense of any of it. At the moment, most of the insurgents are imprisoned in the cells…but the ones who hadn't known about their plans are being held together in the central plaza, and the Three Kings of the Forest are currently debating their fates."

Lute reacted to Ain's initial statement with bewilderment, but Elisabeth immediately sussed out the reason behind the internal division. Yet again, it all came back to the demi-humans' obsession with blood purity. Aguina and the other traitors had wanted to make sure the citizens with the highest and second-highest grade of blood purity didn't get completely wiped out, so they probably concealed the information about the hostages and the traitorous demands being made of them from some of their comrades. They knew that if they kept them from being complicit in the betrayal, the beastfolk would spare them.

That way, even if the mixed-race folk lost, the demi-humans' roots would survive.

Elisabeth thought back on Aguina's words.

"Protecting our blood purity is important to preserve our people's dignity—in fact, it's absolutely essential. As I see it, we have no other choice."

Aguina was willing to prioritize his people's dignity over his own happiness to the bitter end. His family had been taken hostage, and on top of all that, the betrayal he was being asked to make served to advance his people's interests.

At that point, how could anyone possibly say no?

From the demi-humans' perspective, Aguina's decision was no doubt right and proper. 'Tis a hideous choice, one devoid of reason—yet even so, I've little doubt that man intends to see it through.

As Elisabeth thought, a conflicted expression crossed Lute's face.

"Madam Elisabeth, I'm heading to the cells to confirm the situation. Then I have to go to the imperial family and the Three Kings of the Forest and tell them what we know about the demi-humans' betrayal."

"Aye, good. 'Tis important that a report be given, and they'd never grant me an audience with the Three Kings. Be off."

“Pardon me, then. And, Ain, I’m glad you aren’t hurt. We’ll talk more later.”

After calling over to his beloved wife, Lute left the room. As Elisabeth watched him go, she suddenly realized something. Why had Aguina asked Lute to come with him? Part of it was probably to use her subordinate to get her and La Christoph to lower their guards. On that front, the gambit had been a complete success.

However, there was another important reason as well. Instead of having to relay the information through Elisabeth, Aguina wanted Lute, as a beastman, to see the situation and the choice Aguina had made firsthand. That way, it would serve as a question.

The mixed-race folk are starting an uprising. The humans have been betrayed. The demi-humans did the betraying. Now—what will the beastfolk do?

Two of their imperial princesses had been murdered. Even though there was no way they’d work with the mixed-race folk, there was still the possibility of them joining forces with the demi-humans in the coming war. Unlike the demi-humans with their captured settlement, the beastfolk had no clear reason to fight. But that was why Aguina had gone out of his way to share his fears about the future with Lute.

Mankind had caused a tragedy. Yet even now, the power gap between them and the other two races continued to grow. At some point in the future, the minorities were going to find themselves absorbed. So would they rather be ruled by the mixed-race folk, or the humans?

That was the choice they had to make.

Humans weren’t even aware of how exclusivist they were. And both the other races knew it.

In the end, what will the beastfolk do?

Elisabeth gazed at Lute’s back as he receded down the hallway. She wordlessly clenched her fists.

*

It’s time for a story.

A beautiful, poignant fairy tale.

Three years ago, the world very nearly met a tragic end. However, that seemingly immutable fate was altered by a single person. And the one who accomplished that miraculous feat wasn’t a grand hero of any sort.

He was a boy who had reincarnated from another world following a life of abuse and a meaningless death.

He got a second chance at life, then had a number of experiences, some horrifying and some irreplaceable. Then after a long series of battles, he obtained a colossal amount of mana and used it to save someone precious to him.

And while he was at it, he saved the world.

By sacrificing himself.

After burdening himself with God and Diablo, the boy fell into a deep slumber at the World's End. Thanks to his deeds, the people of the world managed to avoid the apocalypse. The greatest good for the greatest number was, surely, the greatest outcome.

It was a tale of admiration, foolishness, and love. But whenever someone's story ends, there are some things that yet remain. With its lease on life renewed, the world continued on. But the bells would eventually toll on a new curtain's rise.

For that is the way bells and curtains are.

However, every single thing about the new story—

—is hideous and vile.

A gust of wind struck Elisabeth on the cheek. She was standing out on a balcony.

It had been built atop one of vast branches that jutted out from the World Tree. She stood there and silently looked down. There was a long scar on the ground that cut through the forest surrounding the World Tree —Vlad's handiwork from the end of days. *Modest* had never exactly been part of the man's vocabulary.

Things inside were tumultuous, but out there, it was quiet and still. A flock of birds flapped their way across the pale-blue sky.

By then, day had already broken. Elisabeth opened her mouth and broke the silence.

"So why follow me here?"

"Why, indeed…? I'm not sure even I can fully explain it."

Ain had come to stand beside her at some point. Ever since Elisabeth had left the infirmary, Ain had been walking alongside her. Ain took off her face mask and gazed up at the sky with her inhuman eyes.

For a little while, the only sound was that of the birds. Eventually, though, Ain quietly spoke.

"There was a day, once, when I asked a young man who seemed like himself, yet at the same time, like someone else, if he was well. He smiled and said he was fine. 'I'm still me, after all…' Even to this day, I'm not sure if it was my duty as a healer to stop him or not."

"…Hmm. I don't know who it is you're speaking of, but he sounds like a most foolish man indeed."

"Mm, and I suspect that this might be why I followed you."

"Hmm? I don't follow."

"You remind me of him quite a lot. You were both harshly wounded, you were both filled with resignation, and you both refused to lose what was important to you. He may have been a sinless soul, and you may be a peerless sinner, but the two of you have the same eyes. And one other thing."

"That being?"

"I only just found out, but I'm pregnant."

“WHAAAAT?!”

Elisabeth couldn’t help but let out a hysterical yelp. The birds resting on the World Tree all hurriedly took off. Ain was the very image of composure, but in contrast, Elisabeth’s mouth hung wide open.

“No, wait, surely Lute, not I, should be the first to hear—”

“Now, I can’t claim to know all the specifics of what’s going on.”

Ain cut Elisabeth off and continued. She gently stroked her belly.

Elisabeth narrowed her eyes. The imperial beastfolk princesses had been murdered, and the demi-humans had betrayed them. Those were the only two things Ain knew. However, that was more than enough to realize that peacetime was over. Ain’s next words sounded almost like a prayer.

“All I wish for is a world where our child can live with a smile on their face.”

“Are you truly prepared to accept the gravity of destroying the potential for children to look up at the sky and dream?”

The reason Ain had said that probably had to do with how similar the Torture Princess was to the Mad King.

He had once saved the world, and Ain’s subconscious had driven her to make the same wish to the person who most resembled him.

And at the same time, Elisabeth heard La Christoph’s words overlaid with Ain’s.

For a short moment, Elisabeth had her breath taken away. The situation was utter chaos. It was unclear which path the beastfolk would take, the humans were idiots, and the Torture Princess had no idea what the best option would ultimately be. And yet…

In a world forcibly made even through revenge, some things will invariably be lost.

“Excuse me, I need to go speak with Lute.”

There were some things that simply couldn’t grow in the soil left in hatred’s wake. Instinctively realizing that, Elisabeth turned to leave. The moment she did, Ain looked up in shock. With an ominous feeling in her gut, Elisabeth stopped in her tracks.

The heavy flapping sound of wings had filled the air. The next moment, countless figures filled the sky.

Thousands upon thousands of birds had all taken flight at once. It was like a storm, or like a black cloud blotting out the sky. It was a bizarre sight, and certainly not one that had come about naturally. The birds were utterly terrified.

Then from amid the countless figures—

—an imposing voice boomed through the sky.

*

“Hear ye, ladies and gentlemen!

“Let my words be heard as a record of our subservience. Let them be heard as a lamentation of the humiliating lives you’ve forced us into. Let them be heard as a cry of rage at the cruelty of the fates you’ve subjected us to. And let them be heard as a hymn of joy. We have wept, and we have wept, and we have wept, and we have no tears left to shed. What choice do we have, then, but to rejoice in your tyranny? We have surpassed resignation, we have transcended despair, and at long last, we have found our answer. But you people can’t even begin to imagine the cruelties we had to suffer to reach it.

“You only see what you want to see, only hear what you want to hear.

“It is in weakness that people have room to grow. Yet you persisted in your ignorance. So, so many of you insisted on continuing your insane foolishness. Who allowed you to be so stupid, so cruel?

“Why should we have to forgive you?

“For make no mistake—we have been called on to forgive you time and again.

“A thought crossed my mind once—if the end of days truly had been upon us, maybe it would have all been fine. All your atrocities could be forgiven, written off as isolated incidents of fear-induced derangement.

“But God and Diablo failed to bring down the hammer—so I must do it in their stead.

“I’ll take this world, I’ll make it my own, and I’ll kill every last fool who walks upon it. I don’t need a reason. After all, justice died long ago. At this point, what use does anyone have for something so decent and proper? And at the end of the day, it doesn’t matter whether I do anything; it won’t affect our ultimate fate. Salvation isn’t coming, ladies and gentlemen. Not for you, not for anyone. And certainly not for me.

“It’s clear now that God has no mercy.

“It’s clear now there is no other way.

“The sun has gone dark—now, let the killing commence.

“We, the mixed-race folk, hereby declare our rebellion against you.”

⁂

“—Longinus.”

Elisabeth snapped her fingers.

When she did, a spear shot through the flock faster than a bolt of lightning, like an act of divine retribution. Elisabeth’s attack struck true, piercing through the communication device hidden among the birds. It tumbled to the ground with an earsplitting screech.

The announcement was over. However, every single person gathered in the World Tree had undoubtedly heard Lewis’s words.

Elisabeth clenched her fists tight. Then and there, the proclamation had been made.

The opening act was over, and the war had begun in earnest. They'd escaped the end of days and been saved, but now the curtain had well and truly risen on a new stage. The avengers were revolutionizing the world.

At long last, punishment had caught up with sin.

'Tis only natural those killed should bear grudges.

The day of forgiveness would never come. And the victims had every right to curse, resent, and detest the world. *However*, Elisabeth thought as she dug her nails into her palms. Before she could finish the thought, though, she heard a familiar voice call out from behind her.

"Ah, Madam Elisabeth, there you are! I imagine you heard that just now. They're moving faster than we expected!"

"That was a rather bold declaration of war they just made. I had thought they would lie low for a little longer. In any case, though, the humans and beastfolk intend to hold a conference, and… Lady? **Whassup? That face you're makin' ain't like ya.**"

Izabella and Jeanne came running toward her. It would appear that when they heard the decree, they'd immediately come looking for her. However, Elisabeth remained silent. She gazed out over the now-quiet forest. Then after narrowing her eyes as though trying to see to the world's end, she finally spoke.

"Aye, I suppose that's necessary… However, I hope you'll excuse me if I slip away for a bit. It shall take some time to get things set up, I imagine? I've every intention of returning before I'm needed… Or rather, should I—?"

Elisabeth glanced over at Ain. There was something she needed to tell Lute. However, Ain returned Elisabeth's crimson gaze and shook her head. She stroked her still-thin belly.

"It would seem you and I were thinking much the same thing. If you have somewhere you wish to be, then by all means, go. I'll speak to him. Besides, if he heard about the pregnancy from anyone but me, he might well faint."

"Aye, true. Lute has many traits, and getting overly shocked by things is certainly one of them. I leave him to you, then."

Elisabeth gave her a small nod and walked off. Izabella watched her, puzzled. That said, she didn't move to stop her. She bit her lip in thought. Her face, which was still beautiful despite the drastic change it had undergone, contorted in sorrow. Jeanne remained expressionless, but her voice took on a concerned tone.

"My lady…is something the matter?"

"Forgive me. I just remembered some business I need to attend to. There's somewhere I have to go before the meeting. You should stay with His Majesty."

"No, I'm coming with you. I'm yours, in body and soul."

"I appreciate the sentiment, but I ask that you let me go alone. Please don't follow me."

After making her wishes exceedingly clear, Izabella strode off as well. She passed Elisabeth and left the area.

Elisabeth glanced back over her shoulder. The golden Torture Princess was standing in abject shock. Then all of a sudden, she collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut. Jeanne accompanied her over-the-top reaction with a small whisper.

"Have I already been rejected, by any chance? **Maaaaan…are you for real?**"

"I can't say I know the particulars of your situation, but are you sure you aren't just jumping to conclusions?"

Ain immediately began consoling her. As she listened to them, Elisabeth started walking again. She withdrew her jewel, then flipped it into the air. A teleportation circle traced itself atop the ground.

Crimson flower petals and black darkness whirled through the air, and a cylindrical wall the color of blood rose up around her.

When it shattered, the Torture Princess was gone.

Once again, Elisabeth had vanished from the beastfolk lands.

*

She materialized in a place with no night or day.

It was a pure place, one crafted from snow and water, wind and mana.

Above her head, a rainbow curtain fluttered in a milky-white sky with no sun or moon. Her surroundings were beautiful, but it was a hollow beauty. Dainty crystals fell from the sky and crunched underfoot as she walked.

Eventually, she reached a sight she'd seen time and again.

There were two pillars of ivy toppled over, like corpses of giants.

The two of them were lying on top of each other and propping each other up. A shrine-like cave sat at their center.

Elisabeth sat down in it, surrounded by ivy decorated with azure and crimson roses.

Suddenly, she let her body go limp. A small *thump* echoed as her back impacted the crystal.

She quietly closed her eyes, as she had once before.

Two people were sleeping inside the crystal at her back.

They were as silent as ever, and unchanging smiles adorned their faces.

The crystal was cold and hard. The distance its clear walls separated was slim, yet it was farther than the World's End.

Kaito Sena wasn't the Torture Princess. He wasn't a saint. He wasn't even the Mad King. He was just a boy. Yet now he was slumbering with his bride, bearing the burden of a world that by all rights he should have had nothing to do with.

Elisabeth thought. The boy had known just how horrible people were. He knew that fact remained true, even across worlds. Yet even so, he saw the world as beautiful. Because that was where the people he cared about lived. *"So I'll protect it,"* he'd boasted. He'd smiled to the very end.

And now people were trying to rob that smile of its meaning.

Everyone is the same. Indeed, even I.

They were all but swine, hideous beyond compare.

Humanity had made a mistake, countless people had stood by and watched, the mixed-race folk had turned to vengeance, the imperial princesses had died nobly, the demi-human man had betrayed the world for those he cared about, and the saints' representative had died with a heart full of belief in both God and creation.

Now the survivors were jumping at shadows and starting a new battle.

And the world would keep turning, just as properly as ever.

Humanity, demi-humans, beastfolk, and mixed-race folk were all the same. When they were viewed not as individuals, but as groups, none of them were deserving of belief in the slightest. Yet even so—

…Even so?

"Say, Kaito…"

Still facing forward, Elisabeth let out a whisper. The Torture Princess refused to turn around.

Yet even so, she let out a quiet murmur, like a single drop of blood shed straight from the heart.

"…would it not be better for a world such as this simply to end?"

She received no answer.

Inside the crystal, the world's two saviors simply kept on smiling.

Afterword

It's gotten quite cold lately, hasn't it? Now, who was it that wrote *"the next book is coming out this summer"* in the end of Volume 6? Ah, right, that idiot Ayasato. I'm truly ashamed. Still, thank you for buying *Torture Princess*, Volume 7. Not only did I run into a number of unforeseen complications after I finished Volume 6, but I also ended up exhausting myself so badly that it affected my health. Thanks to my editor giving me both advice and time, though; I'm confident I was able to finish the book itself without having to compromise on its quality. I offer my deepest apologies to everyone who was eagerly awaiting the series' continuation, but I really hope you enjoy the book now that it's finally out.

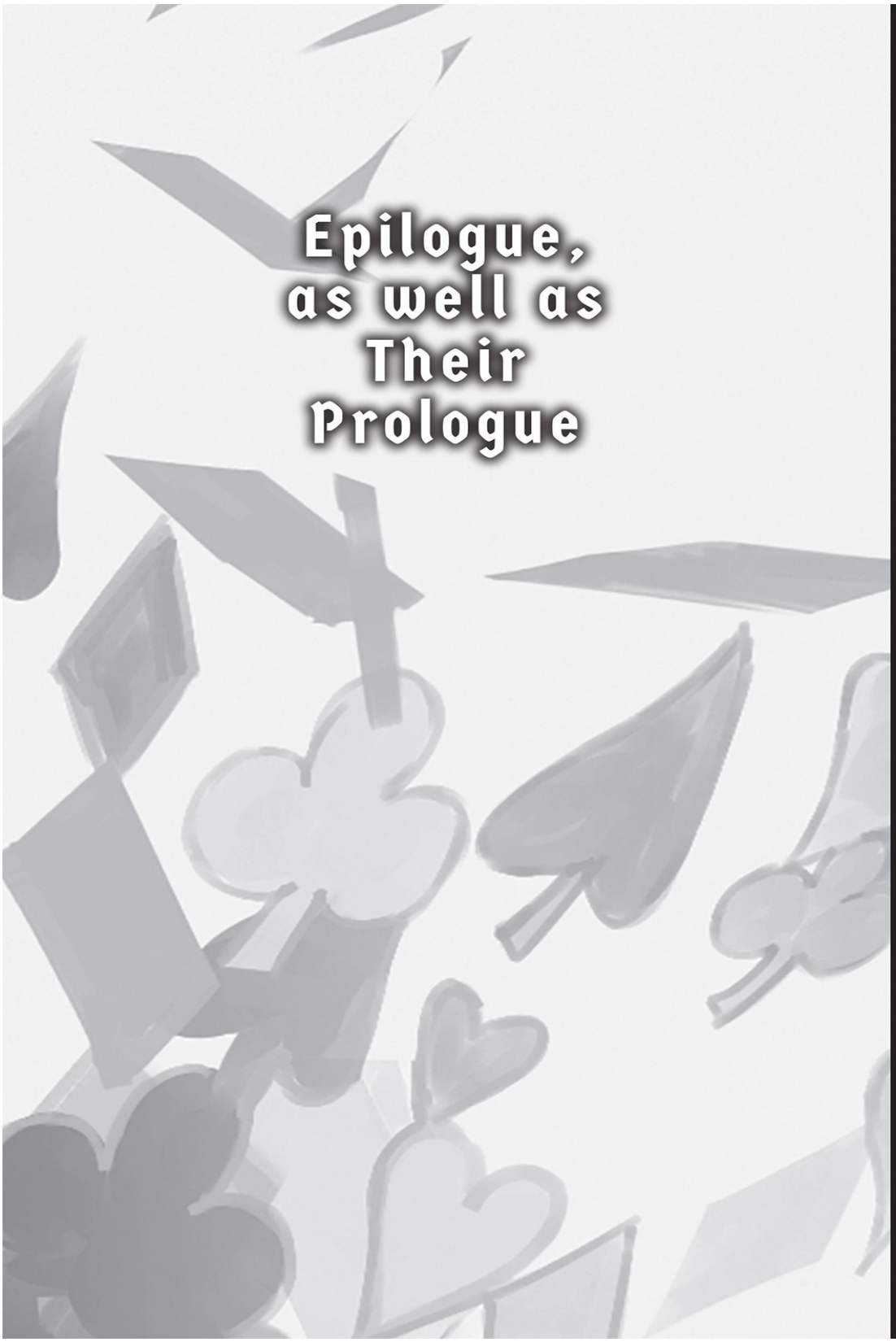
Now, I'm running out of space here, so I have to get to the acknowledgments fairly quickly. To Saki Ukai, for all your wonderful art; to my editor O, for all your kindnesses; and to Hina Yamato, for your lovingly crafted manga adaptation, thank you so much. I'd also like to extend deep thanks to everyone else involved in the process, as well as to my beloved family, particularly my sister.

And most importantly, to all the readers who waited patiently for Volume 7 and are now finally reading it, you have my sincerest thanks. If it isn't too much to ask, I hope you see both the book and the series as a whole through to their coming conclusions.

What lies beyond that single lamentation and that single meeting?

Is it something—or is it nothing?

Epilogue, as well as Their Prologue



Epilogue, as well as Their Prologue

Down at the bottom of the well, Sara Yuuki had a dream.

Her frail arms were covered in cigarette burns, her broken fingers were stiff from how they'd knit, the right half of her body was crushed from when she'd been thrown down there, and her eyeballs were clouded over. It was unlikely that her body would ever be found. Her fourth father and her mother, who was head over heels for him, would probably just claim she'd run off.

Just like how Alice had gone off to Wonderland.

They'd say she'd gone far, far away.

As the pain continued weighing heavily on her, she gazed up hazily at the sky. The falling rain clogged up her throat. By that point, she couldn't even tell if bugs were crawling into her mouth or not anymore. For a moment, the thought *I don't want to die* flashed through her mind, but the young girl wasn't even sure if it had been caused by a legitimate attachment to life or merely by fear.

Sara Yuuki's life was fading away. But instead of infinite blackness, she saw a dancing light.

It was almost like her life was flashing before her eyes, like in stories.

But this was something else entirely, something sinister.

There were corpses of some strange creatures as far as the eye could see.

Tons and tons and tons of some part-lizard, part-dog, part-human creatures had been cast aside. All of them were dead. Their chests had been torn open, and their limbs had been ripped off. Their eyes, ears, teeth, and tongues were all missing. Each of them lacked so much as a shred of basic dignity.

Someone was weeping before the mountain of corpses. He tenderly stroked each one as he wailed.

The man's face was shockingly ugly. Its right half was reptilian, and its left half was human. However, both sides were filled with a profound grief. It made his face look much more human than either of Sara's parents' had. The weeping continued for a long, long time.

Suddenly, though, he stopped, as though he had no tears left to shed.

He turned his golden eyes toward Sara. She gasped.

It was clear from his expression that he was a victim.

No, his eyes burned with malice and rage, and there was a warped smile plastered across his face. Sara could tell—that man was broken. And just like her, someone had broken him.

Then an overpowering voice filled the air.

“—God and Diablo failed to bring down the hammer.

“—So I must do it in their stead.”

And then with a firm *thump*, Sara Yuuki’s heart stopped as though the bell signaling the end had been rung.

Sara Yuuki, the girl who should have been dead, opened her eyes once more. The light of a bonfire filled her gaze. She appeared to be in a dimly lit stone room. She blinked. Standing in front of her was the man from before. Now, though, he was wearing a mask that had been cut in half.

His visible eye had none of the passion she’d seen in it earlier. Now it was empty and hollow.

All of a sudden, the man in black parted his thin lips, looked straight at Sara, and spoke.

“O Sinless Soul, stricken down in a manner most foul—from this day forth, you will live as our weapon.”

His tone left no room for refusal. However, Sara didn’t understand what he meant. She was simply confused. Then the man in black shook his head. He began murmuring like a man possessed.

“No, no. That’s not it. You finally came… I was finally able to call you, O wounded soul, O pure being from another world, O beacon of our hope, O answer to our prayers, O key to our revolution of the world.”

The man in black knelt before her. That was when Sara realized.

The man was trembling so hard that he couldn’t stop. He was crying. Tears were rolling down his emotionless face. He launched into a desperate plea without so much as explaining the situation.

“You’ll help us, won’t you? You’ll become our hope? Become our joy? I’ve been waiting for you—I’ve been waiting for you for so, so long. O reincarnation from another world. O limitless vessel.”

I’m truly happy I got to meet you.

That was what the man in black was saying.

And for Sara Yuuki, that was enough.

* * *

She gently reached out her hands. Then Sara—no, now she was nobody, just a dead girl—embraced the man tight. He went stiff. The girl whispered affectionately so as to wipe away his sorrow.

“You did call me, didn’t you? You invited me to Wonderland… All right, then, very well. From now on, I’ll live for your sake. I’ll be your hope, your joy, and anything else you want me to be. But I have one request, if I may.

“I’m afraid I don’t know much about weapons, so if it’s okay, I’d like to be your daughter instead.”

The girl smiled. “Of course,” the man replied.

That marked the moment of their meeting—the meeting between the solitary girl and the solitary monster.

It’s time for a story. I hope you’ll be kind enough to remember it.

No matter what may come, please remember this truth.

It’s a story of a girl who was brutally killed by a human, and a story of a monster who was cruelly killed by a human.

Or perhaps it’s a story of a child who was abandoned by her parents, and an avenger who decided to destroy the world.

A story of nothing more—

—than repentance, dreams, and hatred.

A story of salvation.

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